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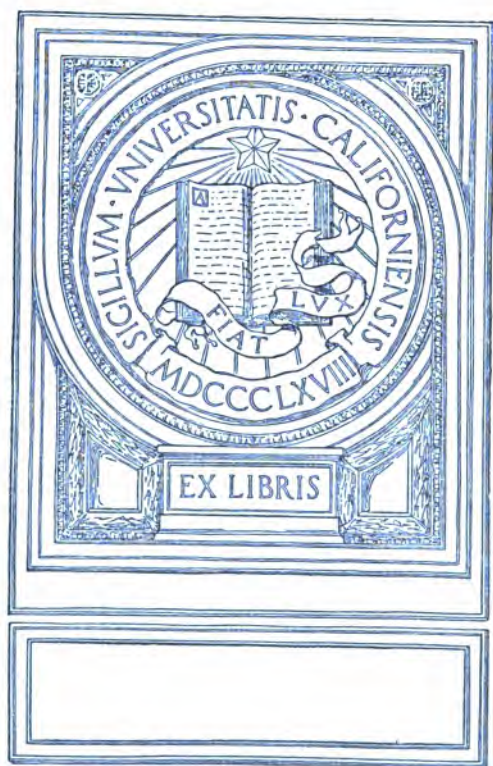
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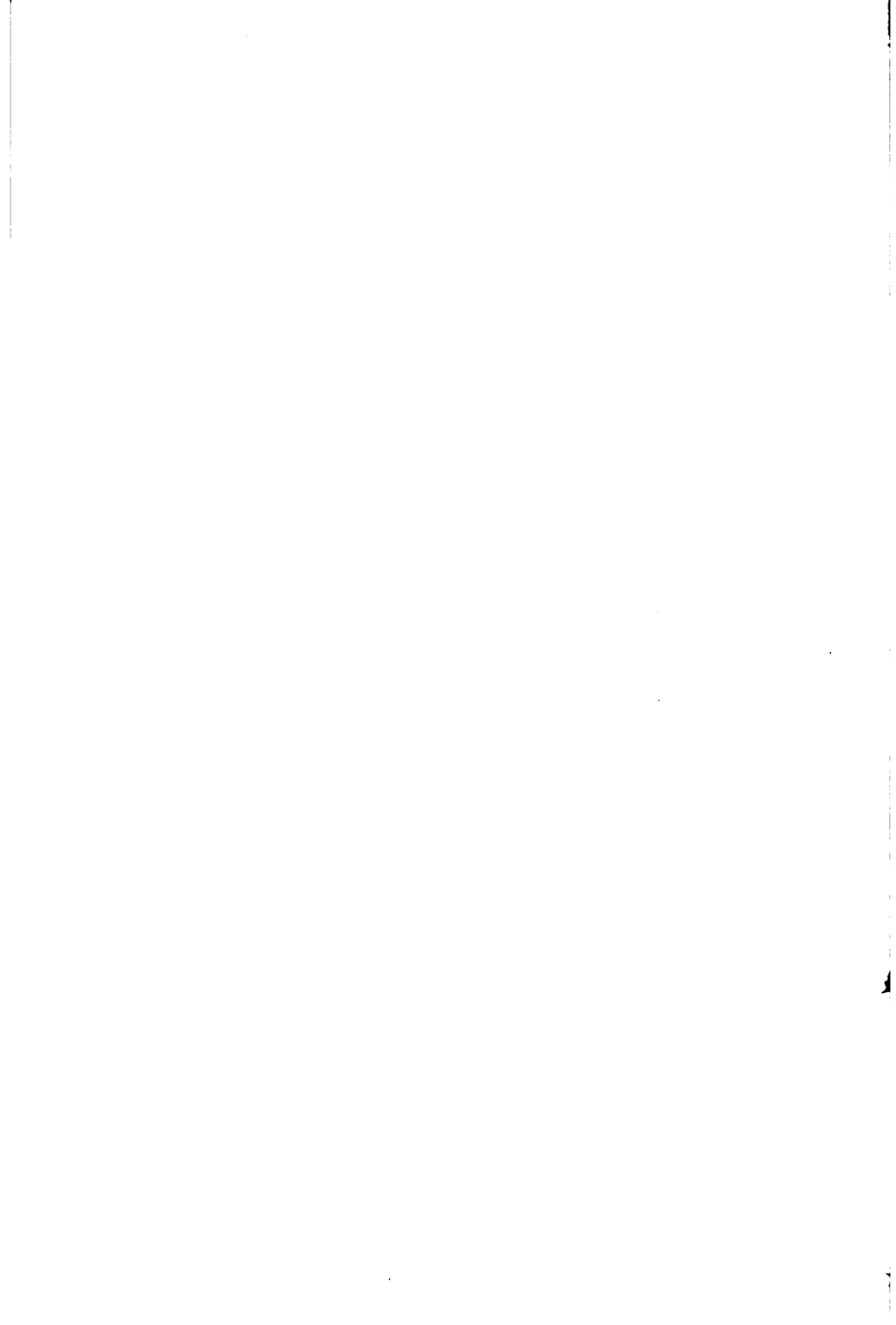
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HIDDEN TRAILS

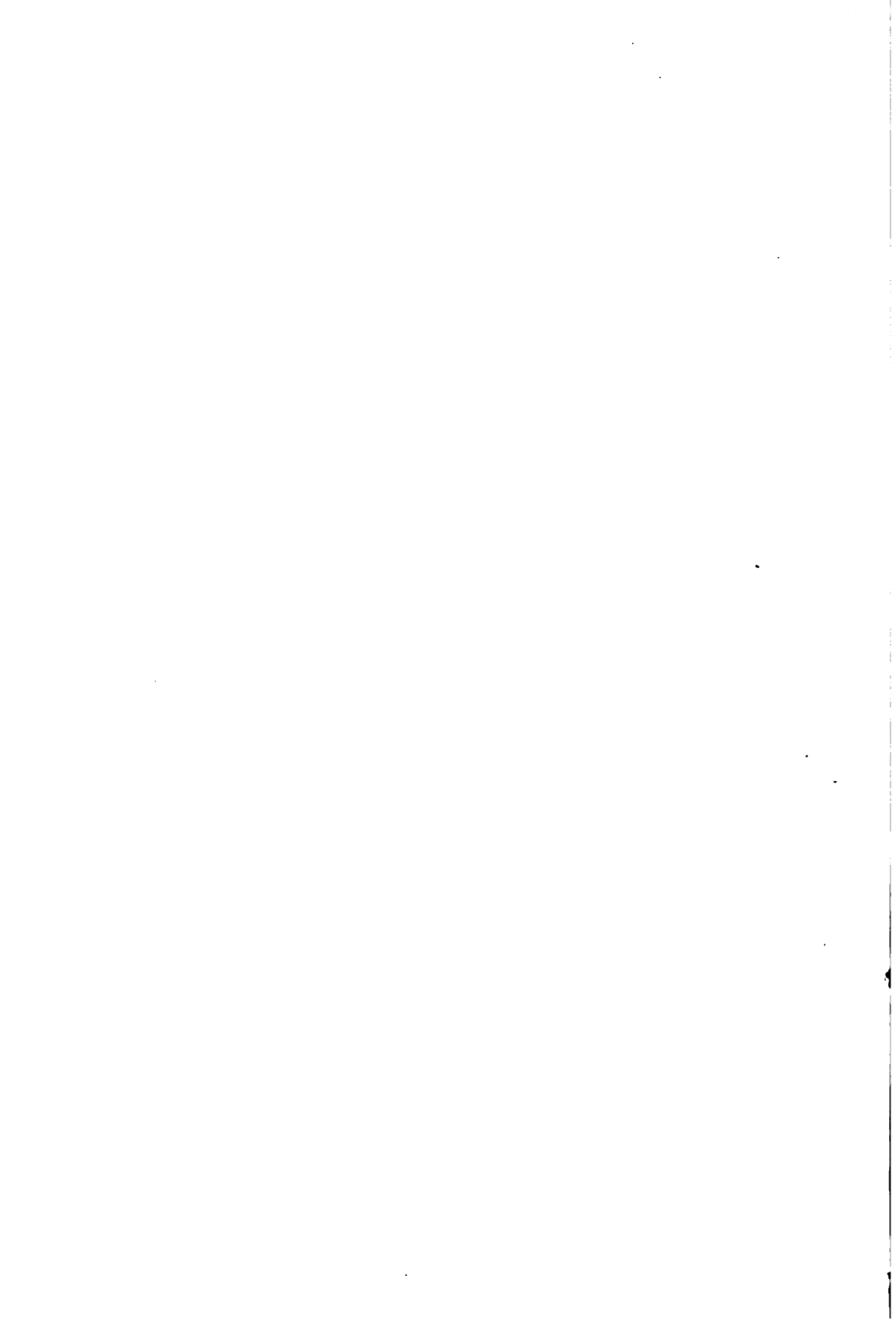
WILLIAM PATTERSON
WHITE



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HIDDEN TRAILS



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“ . . . The puncher seized the girl's fingers in a fervent grasp. 'I shore am glad to see yuh!' he exclaimed”

HIDDEN TRAILS

BY
WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE



FRONTISPIECE
BY
RALPH PALLAN COLEMAN

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1920

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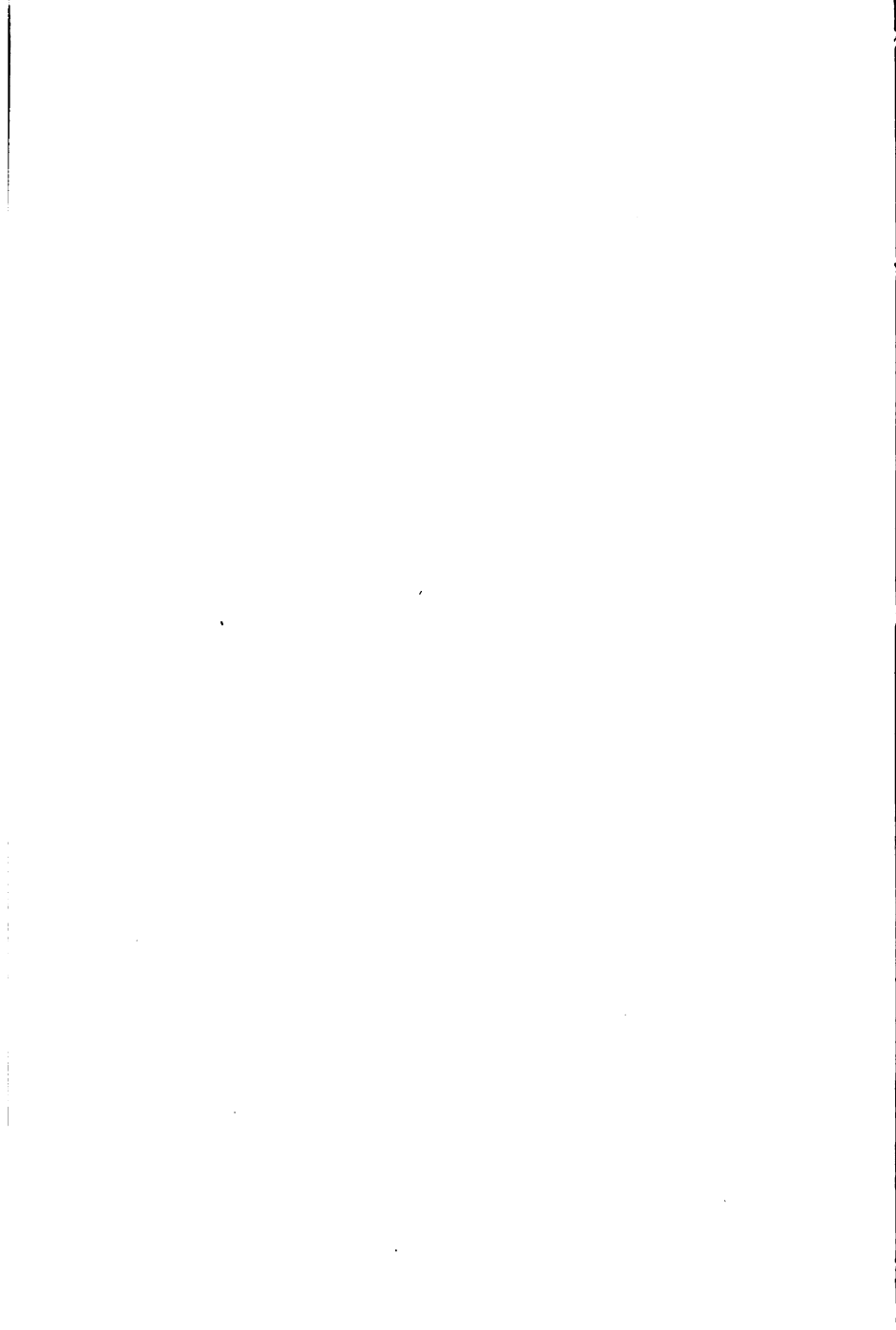
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HIDDEN TRAILS



HIDDEN TRAILS

CHAPTER I

THE HAPPY HEART

THERE was more than a fair sprinkling of customers in the Happy Heart Saloon. Tom Dowling of the 88, Racey Dawson of the Cross-in-a-box, and Telescope Laguerre of the Bar S were draped against the bar earnestly engaged in lowering the tide in a bottle of Old Crow. Four of the Hogpen outfit and a skinny gentleman hailing from the Double Diamond A were absorbed in draw at the table in the far corner. At the other table, near the door, sat Johnny Ramsay of the Cross-in-a-box. He was a tall, lean young man, with a cool, sardonic gray eye and a sunburned face.

Taking infinite pains, he built himself a cigarette. But instead of lighting the slim, white roll, he crushed it between his brown fingers, blew away the clinging grains of tobacco, and clasped his hands behind his head. He glanced at his three friends braced at the bar and yawned. He gazed at the card players, and his yawn became wider. He tilted back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

Then, because he was bored, he brought the front legs of the chair to the floor with a crash, fished out a tremen-

dous clasp-knife and began to whittle the table-top. In a plaintive monotone he began to sing:

"I ain't got no sweetheart,
I ain't got no sweetheart,
I ain't got no sweetheart,
To sit an' talk with me."

"I shore wish to Gawd yuh had a sweetheart!" a peevish voice announced at the tail of the first verse. "Then maybe yuh'd stop choppin' my table to pieces!"

Johnny lifted cool gray eyes to the hot and angry face of the Happy Heart's proprietor.

"She's a right nice table," he observed pleasantly, and made the chips fly.

"Say——" began the outraged proprietor.

"Now look here," urged Johnny, "I ain't got a thing to do, not one I'il thing, an' I ain't got no sweetheart like I say, an' I gotta do somethin', ain't I, 'cause if I don't I'm likely to do most anythin'. So there y'are."

The facile explanation was not illuminating. Nor did it satisfy the proprietor. But Johnny Ramsay was known as an impulsive young man of uncertain temper. The proprietor had no wish to antagonize the young man. He resorted to diplomacy.

"If it's all the same to you, Johnny," he said, in a wheedling tone, "I'd just as soon yuh'd cut somethin' else, a tree maybe, or the wife's kindlin' or anythin' like that. But yuh know how it is yoreself, folks like to play cards on that table, an' whittlin' her up'll sort o' spile her."

"Puttin' her thataway makes it a cat with another tail entirely," Johnny declared handsomely, and closed his knife.

Satisfied, the proprietor departed. The customers who

had watched the little scene grinned at each other and returned to their liquor. Johnny attacked the construction of another cigarette.

At this juncture a stranger entered the saloon and crossed to the bar. He was a man of middle height, this stranger, with a curling brown beard and a quick, bright eye. Johnny idly watched him as he stood with one foot on the rail and drank his whiskey. The Cross-in-a-box puncher noted that the brown-bearded man, while careless in attitude and demeanour, was, over the rim of his glass, subjecting each occupant of the room to a close and heedful scrutiny.

"Must be a deputy or somethin'," thought Johnny, and turned his eyes toward the back of the room, for he perceived that his turn was coming next.

Johnny's roving glance fell on one of the rear windows. This window was open and through it a man was staring, with a peculiar malevolence, at the brown-bearded stranger. But on the instant the man wheeled and disappeared.

"Now that's shore a odd number," commented Johnny, referring to the malevolent one, not his disappearance. "An' I dunno know him, either. Whoever he is, the jigger with the brown whiskers ain't popular with him a li'l bit."

Johnny, reflecting on the strangeness of life, tilted his chair back against the wall. He hooked his heels in a rung and his thumbs in his belt and appeared to drowse. But he was not drowsing. Far from it. Through the slits of his narrowed eyelids he was alternately watching the brown-bearded stranger and the front door. For, in the longhorn country, when one gentleman bestows baleful glares upon another, it behooves the innocent bystander to be vigilant.

Johnny was not greatly surprised when the vindictive-looking window-gazer walked in from the street and went immediately to the bar.

He was not a prepossessing person, this second stranger. In the first place his long frame was rawboned to a degree, and he shambled rather than walked. His hands, large and splay-fingered, bristled to the nails with stiff red hair. His face was hairless, freckled, hollow-cheeked and long-jawed. His nose was hooked like an eagle's beak, and his eyes were of a blank, curious yellow.

The man, as he stood in front of the bar, pushed back his hat, a wide, white Stetson with an extra high crown. Johnny saw that the man's forehead was reptilian and his hair the hue of flame.

The brown-bearded stranger, beyond a keen glance, paid the newcomer no attention. The red-head appeared not to be conscious of the other's presence. Johnny slumped farther down in his chair and became even more watchful.

The flame-haired stranger, limiting himself to one finger at a throw, had two drinks. Then he slouched across the floor to where the card players were busy. He watched them for a space.

"Gents," he said suddenly in a singularly pleasant voice, "gents, is this here a private game or can anybody get in? Yuh see, I got some *dinero* I'd shore admire to get action on."

"Shore yuh can," agreed the skinny gentleman from the Double Diamond A, who was losing. "Sit in, an' welcome. Maybe yuh'll change my luck."

"Yuh can just kiss yore coin good-bye," laughed one of the Hogpen boys. "Yuh'll shore lose it. Luck's with me to-day."

"That so?" said the red-head, smiling in such a way that the long canines showed on the left side of his mouth. "Then let's all have a drink on the strength of it. Name yore pizen, gents."

Bottle and glasses were brought to the table by the bartender. Johnny observed that the stranger did not overstep his limit of one finger. Furthermore, the man drank but the merest swallow of the one finger.

Play was resumed. The brown-bearded man still stood at the bar. He had had three drinks, perhaps four. On this point the observant Johnny was not positive.

Of the men at the bar, Dowling began to draw under the influence. Five minutes later he wandered out, a perceptible stagger in his walk. Racey Dawson and Telescope Laguerre continued to talk and drink. Dawson was not one to become plastered very easily, and as to Laguerre, his ability to carry liquor was marvelous.

Johnny watched the card players. When it came the red-haired stranger's turn to deal Johnny was fairly certain that the man dealt himself two cards from the bottom of the pack. But "fairly certain" is not conviction, and it was none of his business anyway. So reasoned Johnny. Alert as the proverbial weasel, he ceased not to observe.

"He's keepin' after Windy," said Johnny to himself, as the play proceeded.

Windy was the skinny gentleman from the Double Diamond A, and his financial state was becoming tottery. Whatever he lost was added to the growing columns of chips in front of the red-head. To these columns the Hogpen boys likewise contributed to some extent.

"He's shore a ring-tailed wonder," admitted Johnny, after the deal had gone round three times, and the stranger had held wonderful hands three times. "This is gettin'

interestin'. That last time he dealt himself *three* cards from the bottom. He's gettin' reckless, that jigger. He don't care nothin' a-tall what he does. An' yet I couldn't swear he done nothin' out o' the way. His fingers is so — quick."

Windy, broke, was endeavouring to put up his six-shooter as security.

"No," demurred the red-head. "I got a gun. Don't want another. Pony an' saddle? Not me, stranger. I got them too."

Windy rose and went to the bar and endeavoured to pawn his gun with the bartender. But the proprietor, entering at the moment, that business arrangement was nipped in the bud.

"No guns goes, Windy," the proprietor stated firmly. "I couldn't give yuh a simoleon for a bushel o' Colts. I got nineteen in a box behind the bar now. Some of 'em's been there six months an' no action yet. I can't sell 'em 'cause if I do the owner's bound to turn up with the price an' want his gun back. Five dollars apiece I gave on 'em — ninety-five wheels, I'm tellin' yuh. An' I might just as well 'a' slung the coin in the stove for all the good she does me. No, Windy, I'm sorry, 'cause yo're a real gent an' a reg'lar customer, but yuh gotta take yore gun an' go some'ers else with her. No, sirree—ponies an' saddles don't go neither. I got four saddles an' five ponies in the corral, an' Gawd knows when the boys'll come for 'em. So there y'are."

Windy departed after vain efforts to raise even such a minor sum as four bits among the other occupants of the room.

Johnny perceived that the red-head, whose deal it was, had done nothing but shuffle and re-shuffle the cards and

watch Windy while the latter was endeavouring to effect a loan. Once he had licked his lips, and the yellow eyes had flickered for an instant to the brown-bearded citizen standing at the bar. For all that the red-head was leaning his stomach against the table and had slouched down his shoulders in a decided slump, there was to Johnny's mind more than a hint of tenseness in the man's aspect. Somehow he reminded Johnny of a dynamite cartridge after the fuse has been lit. There was about both the same suggestion of violent possibilities.

At Windy's departure the red-head straightened in his chair. But he did not begin dealing. He laid the cards on the table.

"Say, mister," he called to the brown-bearded man, "how about takin' our friend's place? Just for a hand or two till he gets back?"

The thin lips had widened into a smile, a smile that displayed the long canines on the left side of his mouth. But the yellow eyes were not smiling. Blank and cold and fixed, they stared at the brown-bearded man.

The latter turned an indifferent head and regarded the speaker.

"I dunno," he said. "I don't feel like poker."

"Just to oblige us," the red-head wheedled in his melodious voice.

Brownbeard shook his head.

"No, I guess not."

"Well, o' course," said the red-head in a tone pregnant with insult, "if yuh'd rather not—or somethin'."

Brownbeard retorted by striding to the table, pulling out Windy's chair and sitting down.

"I'll go you," he said shortly, his eyes, narrowed, gazing fixedly at the red-head.

"Now, that's the talk!" cried the red-head cheerily, while the three Hogpen boys looked from one to the other in wonderment.

It seemed to them that their little playmate had wilfully endeavoured to antagonize Brownbeard. Why? But the cards had been dealt and they picked up their hands with the question unanswered.

Johnny shifted slightly in his chair. What had been apparent to the Hogpen punchers had not escaped his attention. More and more as time progressed he disliked the red-head.

The deal circled the table, and Windy had not yet returned. The red-head did not once look toward the doorway, but it was manifest that he was accelerating the play. He made his bets quickly and handled his cards with suspicious haste.

It came Brownbeard's turn to deal. He gathered up the cards, shuffled them methodically and began to deal. At the instant that he flipped a card to the red-head the latter's long left arm lashed out with the speed of a striking snake, his fingers struck the cards in the dealer's hand and sent them flying.

Johnny did not see the red-head go after his gun. But there was a flash and a crash and a burst of gray smoke, and Brownbeard huddled down in his chair, then flopped forward across the table, his face among the scattered cards.

The red-head was on his feet, his gun, thin smoke spiraling from the muzzle, still in his hand. There was a great and righteous indignation in the red-head's face and in his voice when he exclaimed:

"He tried to skin us, the —— tinhorn! Didja see him deal from the bottom of the deck?"

"No, I didn't," said one of the Hogpen boys, sliding out of his chair with a very pale face.

"I didn't see nothin' like that either," declared Johnny, who had come out of his seeming lethargy on the jump.

"Well, *I* seen him," averred with finality the red-head. "The —— tin-horn! I didn't think he looked like that or I'd never 'a' asked him over."

"Wouldn't yuh?" queried Johnny with a level glance of frank aversion.

The red-head continued to ignore him, and with a nice perception tilted and pulled away the table as Laguerre and a Hogpen boy raised the body of Brownbeard. They laid the body on the top of the bar near the door. There was no need to listen for heartbeats. The red-head's bullet had bored the skull from front to rear. It was Johnny who placed Brownbeard's hat over the dead face, and it was the proprietor who removed the spurs to the end that the bar might not be unduly scratched.

Johnny and the others stood together in the vicinity of the corpse and eyed the red-head. Which person had resumed his seat at the table and was cutting the cards, right hand against left. He looked up and grinned as he caught their glances.

"Some sudden," he said quietly, "but she had to be done. I can't let nobody work a game like that on me. No sir, not while I got my health—an' a gun. She was the only trail out, gents, an' that's whatever."

Still they surveyed him in silence. Johnny yearned to give voice to his suspicion. But there it was—suspicion. He was not sure of his ground. The others, although they had seen nothing to hang suspicion upon, were instinctively

aware that all was not right. The killing, fair enough on its face, yet bore an earmark or two of evil. The red-head had been too abrupt, for one thing, and for another, he had urged Brownbeard, who patently had not desired to play, to sit in the game.

Entered then Slim Berdan, the town marshal, and a few curious citizens.

"What was the trouble?" asked Slim Berdan, a slight, wiry man with a black mustache and goatee.

One of the Hogpen boys told him what he knew of the case. The marshal listened in silence. The red-head displayed no interest in what the puncher had to say. He was playing solitaire now, and his face was serious.

When the Hogpen boy had finished, the marshal walked straight across the floor to the table where the red-head sat. The latter raised his yellow eyes to Berdan's expressionless face. The marshal's hands were at his sides. They were not threateningly close to his guns. They were merely conveniently by.

"Stranger," said the marshal, "we don't know nothin' about yuh, an' we ain't aimin' to know nothin' about yuh. I ain't sayin' a word about the merits o' this case. Maybe you know 'em better'n I do. But I'm tellin' yuh this: yuh got twenty minutes to pull yore freight out o' Farewell. At the end o' that time if yo're still in town we'll sort o' make out to hang yuh some."

"But I like Farewell," protested the red-head injuredly. "I was figurin' on stayin' awhile."

"You'll shore stay quite a while if yo're here after the twenty minutes are up," said the marshal, and, as if the matter had been settled, he turned his back and walked away.

"I can see he means it," mourned the red-head, rising

to his feet and grinning impudently at the line of unfriendly faces across the room. "An' just when I thought I'd found my happy home."

He departed, scuffing his toes. Ten minutes later they saw him ride past the saloon on his way out of town.

CHAPTER II

JOHNNY'S DECISION

IF I wanted to kill a man," declared Johnny slowly, "I dunno but what as good a way as any would be to call him a skin an' plug him quick."

The others nodded. Johnny was voicing their own thoughts.

"Dees feller she deed not even reach for her gun," said Laguerre, jerking his head toward the poor clay on the top of the bar. "Un dem card' was scattair so, we cannot tell w'eddair she was deal de skeen game or not. By gar, Johnny ees right."

"On the other hand," put in Slim Berdan, "this red-haired gent does just exactly what he'd ought to done provided the other feller was cheatin'. In a case like this here yuh can't prove nothin'. Yuh can think a whole lot, an' yuh can tell the jigger who keeps alive at the finish to flit, but that's all yuh can do."

The shooting had a depressing effect. Men ceased to play cards and drank more than was good for the lining of their stomachs. Johnny sat in his tip-tilted chair, his hat pulled low down over his eyes. His thoughts were gloomy. It was not the first time he had seen death. But it was the first time he had seen a man killed without being given a chance to defend himself.

Mike Flynn, the one-legged owner of the Blue Pigeon Store, added to the general melancholy by stumping in

with a sheet and laying out the ground-plan of a shroud on the body of the dead.

"I'll not see him go naked to his grave, the poor feller," asserted Mike Flynn, squinting along the doubled length of sheet. "He's got clo'es, I know that, but a funeral ain't a funeral without a shroud. I've seen many a lad when I was at sea slipped overside, and they all had shrouds. I misdoubt it ain't legal without. Ay, an' a lump or two o' best Welsh to sink 'em down. Glory be, the funerals I've seen. God be with the ould days."

Mike Flynn produced a short and blackened clay and rammed home the tobacco with a stubby forefinger. When his pipe was drawing well he sat down tailor-fashion on one of the card-tables and turned to with needle and thread at fashioning the necessary shroud.

Johnny watched Mike's flying fingers in fascinated silence and wished the storekeeper would stop humming that song. It was a doleful ditty having to do with a man that went to sea and was drowned. Johnny would have gone out into the sunshine in search of relaxation but he was afraid that if he did he would miss something. And that would never do.

"Now, here's a fine job," announced Mike Flynn suddenly, standing up on the table and shading out the completed shroud as the housewife shakes out a table-cloth. "He'll slip into this just as nice as a girl's leg into a silk stockin'."

Mike dismounted from his table. Johnny pulled himself to his feet and went to assist Mike and the others. But before the shroud was adjusted an elderly, gray-mustached citizen pushed his way through the crowding onlookers. This man was Jake Rule, the sheriff of Fort Creek County. Slim Berdan followed in his wake.

"Wait a shake before yuh cover his face up," said the sheriff.

The officer glanced at the dead and nodded.

"Is it?" inquired Slim Berdan.

"Yep, it's Mat Neville," answered the sheriff. "I kind o' suspicioned it might be, when yuh said he had a curly brown beard. —! Mat never cheated in his life!"

"I knowed it!" burst out Johnny.

"I'd shore admire to 'a' been here when it happened, instead o' some'ers else," deplored the sheriff. "I'd enjoyed lookin' over the killer."

Johnny and a half a dozen others made eager haste to describe him, but the sheriff shook his head

"Slim's told me what he looked like," he said, "an' I dunno him a-tall. Dunno as I ever even heard of him before. But I shore would like to 'a' seen him just out o' curiosity."

"Mat Neville," repeated Racey Dawson. "Seems like I heard there was a Wells-Fargo detective down at Seymour City named Mat Neville."

The sheriff glanced casually at Racey.

"This is him," he said shortly.

Creak and jangle! Hoofbeat and bump! The through stage from Paradise Bend to Marysville and the railroad was pulling into Farewell. It stopped in front of the post-office with a wild screeching of brake-shoes.

"By Gawd if the guard ain't downed!" exclaimed Johnny, looking through the window. "An' Whiskey Jim's creased on the head."

Here was a matter requiring instant investigation. The Happy Heart was forthwith deserted by all save the bartender and the corpse.

Whiskey Jim, a bloody bandage under his slanted hat,

hooked a heel on the brake-lever and swelled out his chest. He had a tale to tell and he realized the importance of his position.

"Road agents—again," he replied to the shouted questions. "I'm slowin' up for that bend below the cutbank near the Hogback, when *bang!* goes a Winchester on the bank. An' the lead nicks me an' goes right on without stoppin' an' busts Jack plumb centre. Don't even have time to raise his shotgun, Jack don't. Which that weapon slides clatterin' down on the doubletree an' Jack slides after on his head. That's all, gents, just the one shot, but it's enough. There's a beller o' 'Hands up!' but I don't need it. I've done stopped the team, set the brake, an' reached for the sky already.

"I've only got one good eye—the blood's runnin' down into the other, but I sees a-plenty. There's six o' the hold-ups this trip, an' they work fast. They line my passengers up alongside the stage an' go through 'em. One of 'em clumb up over the wheel an' hauled off the Wells-Fargo box an' dumped her. Then they chased the passengers back inside an' told me to go on. No, they didn't touch the mailbags. Seems like they knowed our Uncle Sammy'd get a heap riled up if they done that.

"I will say this for 'em: they didn't rob me, an' they loaded Jack back on up top an' tied him fast with a lariat, an' they made one o' the passengers tie up my head so's I could see to drive. For road agents, they was right human—considerin'."

"The Hogback's only fifteen mile south o' Rocket," remarked the sheriff. "Why didn't yuh drive back there an' scare up a posse?"

"Say, don't yuh s'pose I'd 'a' done that if I could?" Whiskey Jim protested. "Them fellers said if I didn't keep

a-goin' straight on they'd plug me for keeps, an' I believed 'em. But I told the agent at Cutter when I pulled in there last night, an' he sent one o' the hostlers to the Bend after the sheriff. I'd 'a' left Jack at Cutter only for his sayin' so often how he wanted to be buried in a reg'lar shore-nough graveyard an' a hell-dodger to speak his li'l piece an' all. So he's goin' to Marysville an' have his graveyard. He was a good feller, Jack. I never did know his last name—huh? Now, Sheriff, how I could tell what they looked like when they all had masks on. They was dressed like punchers an' they had a six-shooter an' rifle apiece just like any other respectable gent."

"Is this here the ninth or tenth time yuh been stopped, Jim?" asked the sheriff.

"Tenth. Hell's bells, it shore is gettin' monotonous. Come along with that mailbag, Rime. Djuh think I got time to wait all day?"

When the stage had creaked away, the sheriff spat reflectively into the dust of its passing and turned back with the crowd to the Happy Heart to finish the funeral.

They buried Mat Neville, not very deep, because the ground was hard, but they made amends by piling rocks and small boulders into a cairn. They sang "The Dying Ranger" with their hats off, and a kindly soul fashioned a cross from a cracker box and wrote Mat's name and address on the arms, employing for the purpose a rifle cartridge.

After which they returned to the Happy Heart, for they needed cheering up.

An hour later Johnny Ramsay, Racey Dawson, and Telescope Laguerre were going into Bill Lainey's hotel in quest of supper when a dog-fight started in the street and they stopped to watch it. Just as one dog drove the other howling, a rider jingled up and halted in front of the doorway.

The man was Bill Stahl, sheriff of Sunset County. Bill Stahl spoke to the two punchers, and dismounted. He crossed the sidewalk and awakened Bill Lainey, who, following his habit, was dozing in a wire-bound chair tilted against the wall of the building. Bill Lainey, with a wheeze, heaved his fat bulk upright.

"Seen anythin' o' Mat Neville?" asked the sheriff.

"'Mat Neville'," repeated Bill Lainey, blinking his eyes rapidly, "Mat Neville? Why, why, he's dead."

Bill Stahl swore frankly, and demanded details. Johnny and his two friends, wondering what the official reason for wanting Mat might be, went on into the hotel.

While they were eating, Sheriff Rule, accompanied by Sheriff Stahl, entered the dining room. The Sunset officer carried a doubletree bolt, a carton of tacks, and several notices.

"Nail her on the wall," wheezed Bill Lainey, poking his head turtle-wise through the doorway. "Then gents can have somethin' to read with their meals."

Bill Stahl solemnly tacked up one of the notices with four taps of the doubletree bolt. Then he shifted his chew and expertly drowned a fly on the extreme outside edge of the window-sill.

"Gents," he said to the diners, indicating the notice with a backward jerk of his thumb, "gents, here's a chance to make money. But this reward yuh see here ain't all. Wells-Fargo offers the same. Their notices ain't arrove yet. When they do they'll be posted correct an' proper."

The two sheriffs departed, and Lainey's guests stopped shoveling long enough to read the notice twice over. It was an interesting bit of printing in that it set forth that, to the man or men who would deliver dead or alive, into custody, the several persons of the banditti who were

operating in Sunset County, the territory would pay at the rate of one thousand dollars per bandit. As the man or men who attempted such a delivery stood an excellent chance of being shot, the one thousand per was not excessive.

"Huh," snorted Windy of the Double Diamond A. "This is shore one on ol' Sunset County. Whatsa matter with them tarrapins up there? It oughtn't to be no job a-tall to curry a li'l short hoss like that."

"Yuh think so," contributed one of the Hogpen outfit. "Lemme tell yuh, Windy, as a friend, that when it comes to bein' slick, a band o' road agents like this one o' Sunset's is shore hellamile."

"Y'betcha," corroborated Johnny, as earnestly as a man may with a mouthful of beans, "y'betcha, an' then some."

"I never knowed no road agents real intimate," said Racey Dawson, "but I helped hang one once after he'd held up the Esthertown stage over in Green County when I was workin' for the T Down, an' say! If they're all like that jigger! Yuh hear me talkin' when I tell yuh we had to run that lad eighty mile before we got him, an' we wouldn't 'a' got him then only his hoss slipped on a slide an' him an' hoss went down that slide the whole length of her on their heads.

"The hoss busted most of himself, but the hold-up wasn't only bumped up, an' he scrouged in between two windfalls an' put up a fight to make yore hair curl. He downed one of the boys an' creased a coupla others. But we got him when his ammunition gave out. Yessir, a reg'lar road agent organized for business can most generally make an ordinary gent step as high as a blind dog in a field o' stubble."

"Yo're whistlin'," said another Hogpen boy. "But two thousand apiece is shore a lot."

"But who's to pay for yore time if yuh don't get a one of 'em?" asked a practical Farewell citizen. "She's been goin' on more'n a year, an' them road agents are still as plural as ever."

"That's right," said Piney Jackson, the blacksmith. "She's Sunset's funeral."

"Yuh'll notice, gents, them hold-ups don't get their legs over the tongue in this county," chimed in a Fort Creek booster. "Which they shore know better."

"All the same," muttered Johnny into his half-empty cup, "I wish I had some o' that money."

Racey Dawson overheard the remark and glanced sharply at his friend. Johnny was already shoving back his chair. Without looking either at Racey or Telescope, Johnny left the dining room. Racey nudged Telescope.

"Johnny's got some fool notion," he whispered. "I can tell, because he looks so — careless. Le's foller him."

Once in the street Johnny started in the general direction of the sheriff's house. Opposite the Blue Pigeon Store he turned aside as if to enter, but instead slipped into the narrow space between the side-wall and the next building. And Racey and Laguerre saw him slip.

"What d'I tell yuh?" demanded Racey. "What d'I tell yuh, huh? He's up to somethin' an' he don't want us to know what it is. An' when Johnny gets mysterious he needs lookin' after."

"We weel do dat," said Laguerre, and flashed his white teeth in a grin.

The unsuspecting Johnny hurried past the rear elevation of the buildings on Farewell's single street till he came to the last house. This house was the official residence of

Sheriff Rule. The kitchen door was open. Judging by the clatter and the shrieks, human and otherwise, Mrs. Rule was washing simultaneously the dishes, the dog, and the baby. But Johnny remained unperturbed. In common with every one else, he knew the workings of the sheriff's menage. For it was the custom of ingenious Mrs. Rule to tie the baby and the household pet, by waist and neck respectively, to opposite legs of the table while she went about her housework.

"Hi there, fellah!" called Johnny loudly, one foot on the threshold. "Pull his ol' tail for'm. Whatsa dawg for, huh? Yo're shore one great kid. Gettin' to look more like yore ma every day. Oh, howdy, Mis' Rule," he continued unblushingly, taking off his hat. "I didn't see yuh at first. How are yuh, ma'am? Yo're lookin' fine. Sheriff around?"

Before the pleased and portly Mrs. Rule could reply her husband appeared in the doorway of an inner room.

"You bet I'm around," he shouted above the tumult of wretched dog and happy little child at play. "Gotta be, when young fellers like you come siftin' in to pass compliments with my wife."

"You go 'long!" beamed Mrs. Rule, flapping a dish-towel at him. "Climb out o' my kitchen, the both o' yuh, before I lean on yuh with the broom."

"Come along, Johnny," laughed the sheriff. "She's mad 'cause I heard yuh. Oh, yuh gotta get up early to fool the old man, y'betcha."

"Sheriff," said Johnny, when the door was shut, "what's all this here about them road agents o' Sunset County?"

"Why, yuh know yoreself, Johnny, how them jiggers been holdin' up the stages, an' rubbin' out miner folks an' similar citizens, Yuh——"

"Yeah, I know all that," interrupted Johnny. "I just want to know what you know about 'em."

"Not a —— thing," was the prompt reply, "an' at that it's as much as everybody else knows."

"Don't Bill Stahl know nothin', either?" disappointedly.

"If he does, he ain't told me. Say, Johnny, djuh s'pose if Bill knowed anythin' a-tall to begin work on he'd go cavortin' around tackin' up signs? It stands to reason, Bill bein' a sensible chunker, that he wouldn't want for that reward to be got by some one else less'n he seen he'd no chance to glom on to her himself. Here's Bill now. Y'ask him an' see what he says."

The Sheriff of Sunset pushed open the front door and entered. He had one notice left. This he proceeded to tuck by one corner into a crack in the wall so that it proclaimed slantingly the intentions of the Territory.

"Gotta use her up somehow," he explained. "Yuh can make a lighter out of her when yuh run short, Jake."

"Say, Sheriff, don't yuh know nothin' about them hold-ups?" Johnny began, without preliminary.

The pupils of Sheriff Stahl's greenish-gray eyes became mere pinpoints of steel.

"Meanin'?" he demanded frostily.

Johnny flung up a hand palm outward.

"I don't mean what yuh think I mean, Bill," said he, with his engaging grin. "Djuh s'pose if I meant that I'd come prancin' up an' ask yuh about it?"

"We-ell," said Sheriff Stahl hesitatingly, his voice still icily hard.

"Don't yuh understand, Bill, all I'm tryin' to get at is ain't there some li'l sign for a peg to hang suspicion on? Yuh see, I'm figurin' on goin' after that reward, an' I want somethin' to go on."

"If yuh'd only said that at first," exclaimed Sheriff Stahl, his face clearing. "But I'd oughta knowed yuh didn't mean nothin', Johnny. That's me, always jumpin' spang at conclusions an' missin' the black nineteen out o' twenty. Listen here, Johnny, there ain't nothin' to hang suspicion on. Not one — li'l thing. I tell yuh, them fellers might be light smoke in a gale o' wind for all yuh can see o' them an' their trail. Honest, I'm almost beginnin' to believe in ghosts."

"Wells-Fargo ain't believin' in no ghosts," put in Sheriff Rule.

"Yuh bet they ain't," agreed the Sunset officer. "Johnny, yuh heard me ask Bill Lainey if Mat Neville was around. I was to meet him here this afternoon, an' sort o' talk things over in this deal, an' see if we couldn't find some wagon-track to start in on. But there's no findin' out nothin' from pore Mat now. An' he didn't know no more'n me anyway likely."

"Yuh don't think the red-head could have had anythin' to do with it, do yuh?" was Johnny's question.

"With the hold-ups? Not him, yuh can gamble on it. From what Jake says he's a right tall jigger, skinny as a crane, an' walks funny. There wasn't no gent as tall as him in any o' these hold-ups. I got affidavits an' wrote-out descriptions from Whiskey Jim an' seven other fellers in different hold-ups, an' I know. No sir, they ain't no such chunker as that red-headed killer in the gang. He's somebody that crossed Mat's trail some'ers else or some-thin' an' took this chance to play even."

"But Mat didn't know him," objected Johnny. "If he had he'd never 'a' set down with him so free an' easy."

"Can't help it," snapped Bill Stahl, somewhat nettled at this questioning of his judgment. "She's like I say:

this red-head ain't in the gang. I wish he was. A shinin' landmark like him would be just too easy to trail."

"How many in the gang, Bill?" asked Johnny. "Got any idea?"

"Between twenty an' thirty," the sheriff answered.

"Many's that?"

"It's my guess, an' yuh can go the limit I'm right. Why say, there's only six or seven show up at a hold-up, but by the number o' hold-ups an' the close way they come together there's a lot more'n six or seven in the gang."

"Shore," cut in Jake Rule, "no half dozen could be as busy as all that an' keep it up the way these fellers do. She's a big gang, take my word for it."

"Yeah," said Johnny, his gray eyes more sardonic than ever, "she sounds a heap interestin'. I guess now I'll just go after that reward."

"Just you by yoreself?" queried Sheriff Stahl.

"Just me by myself."

At this juncture the front door flew open and Racey Dawson and Telescope Laguerre entered without knocking. Racey shook his head and his finger at Johnny Ramsay.

"We heard yuh through the window," he said, "an' y'ain't a-goin' to do nothin' like that on yore lonesome. Not for one li'l minute y'ain't. Telescope an' me have decided to go with yuh, an' then we can sort o' look after yuh an' horn in on the two thousand wheels a bandit. Ropin' two cows at once like. What do you guess?"

"I guess yuh can both go plumb to ——!" burst out the indignant Johnny. "Y'act like I needed a nurse!"

"You need two of 'em," averred Racey placidly. "An' yo're goin' to have 'em. Why, Johnny dear, s'pose yuh got shot or plugged or somethin'. What'd we do, I'd like

to know? An' what'd you do, with nobody 'round to write yore will for yuh?"

For an instant Johnny's face hardened, then he laughed.

"Whatcha goin' to do with a couple o' fools like these here?" he asked of the two sheriffs.

CHAPTER III

PLANS

I S'POSE I better act like I never seen yuh before," observed Sheriff Stahl.

"Now that's just what yuh don't want to do," hastily demurred Johnny. "It stands to reason that them fellers are old pie in these parts. They gotta be, or they'd 'a' been caught before now. Well, then, don't yuh s'pose they'll have a fair idea about who's friends with who? Actin' like yuh don't know us'll shore make 'em suspicious."

"Dat ees right." Thus Laguerre.

Sheriff Stahl nodded.

"Yore best plan," went on Johnny, "is just to say 'Howdy' free an' easy when we pass yuh an' let it go at that. If we gotta talk to yuh we'll let yuh know an' meet yuh out in the hills some'ers. None o' this comin' to the house at night. They'd catch on to anythin' like that quick. An' yuh'd better not say anythin' about us to yore deputies, either."

"Why not?" demanded the sheriff. "They're good boys, an' sensible boys an'——"

"I know they are, but they're young, an' they take a drink now an' again."

"So do yow. So do I."

"That's all right, but we ain't gabby. Tellin' yore deputies won't help none. She's enough for you to know. Let it go at that."

"All right, all right, I won't tell 'em." The sheriff's indorsement was a grumble.

"Now for the rest of it," went on Johnny: "One of us'll get a job at the stage corrals, an'——"

"I'll fix it up with the agent," interrupted Sheriff Stahl.

"Yeah, an' have 'Tug' Wilson blat it all out the first time he gets loaded!" exclaimed Johnny. "Tug's a good agent all right, but he's a damsight better drunkard."

Sheriff Stahl, not at all pleased at Johnny's prompt dismissal of his every suggestion, began to stare rather fixedly at the Cross-in-a-box puncher.

"By Gawd!" tactfully interposed Sheriff Rule. "I just got in three quarts o' fifteen-year-old Bourbon by the last stage. Straight from Kentucky, gents, an' like oil. I'll get her."

The whiskey, mellower than a ripe Sheepnose, greatly lessened the tension. Sheriff Stahl pulled in his horns and smiled pleasantly over the second glass.

"Yuh got one job settled," said he; "how about the others?"

"Jobs won't be too plenty, that's a cinch," observed Racey, "especially jobs where we can slide around an' look over whatever's infectin' the landscape."

"There y'are!" Johnny exclaimed. "Stray men!"

"Stray men!"

"Shore, stray men. Huntin' strays'll give us all kinds o' chances to chase around, an' it'll look natural. Nobody wonders or asks questions about where a stray man goes. She's a cinch. We'll fix her up. Don't you worry, Sheriff. Yore road agents is as good as dead, caught, or lynched."

The patronizing tone of the last sentence grated on the sheriff's sense of what was due him. He would have been pleased to take offense, but decided that such a course

would be both small-chested and foolish. He grunted his trust that Johnny's assertion would prove correct and opened the door.

"See yuh in the Bend—yuh'll know where to find me," was his parting remark.

The door slammed.

Three minutes later Johnny led his two friends in the direction of Bill Lainey's corral. Once behind the corral, Laguerre and Racey faced Johnny, their expressions eloquent of the doubt within.

"Who weel geeve us de job?" questioned Laguerre.

"That'll be easy," the confident Johnny assured him. "Wages are no object with us. We're willin' to work for nothin'—except the feller who draws the stage station job. He's gotta have reg'lar wages to make it look right. But the stray men are different. Scotty——"

"Oh, they are, are they?" cried Racey. "Which I'd admire for to know why. Me, personal, I'm no philanthropist, an' workin' for nothin' is expensive."

"Oh, unbutton yore shirt an' spend two bits once in a while!" snarled the exasperated Johnny. "If I liked the feel o' money as much as you do, I'd shore turn road agent myself."

"Well, I don't like workin' for nothin'," grumbled Racey.

"Neither do I," countered Johnny, "but that's no reason why yuh gotta lollop around with a face as long as a pony's. Stop cryin', for Gawd's sake! Baby can't have his bottle now, no matter how much he bellers!"

"Yuh know what yuh can do, don't yuh?" barked Racey, indignantly.

But Johnny refused to follow up the opportunity, and proceeded to finish the outline of his plan.

"Scotty Mackenzie'll give us jobs," he said, "an' havin' us work for nothin'll hit Scotty right where he lives. He's worse'n Racey when it comes to savin' money—— Aw right, aw right! Have it yore own way. Yuh throw money away with both hands an' hire a friend to help yuh! How's that? As I was sayin' before Racey climbed up on the table again, Scotty'll make out to hire Telescope an' me, an'——"

"What!" howled Racey. "Telescope an' you! Is that the way yuh've schemed her out? I'm to work around the station an' wrangle ponies while you an' Telescope scamper over the hills an' far away an' have all the fun. Is that it, huh? Well, it ain't! Yuh got a helluva nerve, you have, but I won't do it! I'll be a stray man too if I gotta hire myself to myself, an' that's whatever!"

"Tell the neighbours, why don't yuh? We'd shore like everybody to know our li'l plans."

"But you want all the fun," protested Racey, lowering his voice.

"I thought you didn't wanna work for nothin'. That stage station job ought to suit yuh ace-high."

"It did, when I figured on one o' you fellers takin' it. But comin' right down to cases, I don't want none of it in mine. I want action, an' I'm a-goin' to get it."

"Well, we'll see," soothed Johnny. "We'll see how we can fix her up to please yuh."

"Yuh can just bet yuh will," the truculent Racey stated with conviction. "I've seen prize hawgs, but yo're the prizest."

"Aw shut up, an' let a feller think!" rejoined the ever-courteous Johnny.

"What with?" jeered Racey.

"Say——"

"Yeah, you showed how much yuh thought by talkin' man-fashion to Bill Stahl. What yuh wanta get him riled for? Maybe we'll need him."

"Yuh poor idjit! Honest to Gawd, Racey, if yuh had any more brains yuh'd be half-witted."

"Huh!"

"Lookit here. Bill Stahl's either a plumb fool or he's in with the road agents."

"I don't t'ink so, me," declared Laguerre.

"Which—in with the road agents?"

The half-breed nodded.

"Yuh dunno, I dunno, an' Racey shore dunno. But I aim to find out. If he's square, then he's a fool, 'cause a square sheriff who can't locate even a whiskey-glassful o' suspicion against them hold-ups by this time must be a fool. If he's square an' a fool, gettin' him mad can't hurt us, an' it'll only make him work harder. If he ain't square then he'll do somethin' to put the kibosh on us prompt an' right away."

"What yuh tell him anythin' at all for then?"

"To find out where he stands. We gotta know that. Before we're through we'll have to find out where a good many gents in Fort Creek County stand. Huh?—Shore not. We'll be all right so long's we watch him. The first sudden move he makes we'll get him, an' there's our work half done. When we get just one o' the gents who's mixed up in this the rest'll be easy. You'll see. Whatsa matter with yuh, Racey? Lookit Telescope. He ain't actin' nervous o' nothin'."

"I ain't nervous!" bawled the outraged Racey. "An' I can lick the two of yuh with both hands tied behind me."

"I guess now yuh really could," said Johnny seriously,

"'cause all yuh'd have to use then would be yore tongue. Now, now, good hoss, nice li'l doggie, pretty kitty, don't scratch. Telescope, he's gettin' too fresh, we'll just have to give him the Dutch rub. Grab him!"

So they grabbed him, and, despite heavy resistance, they inflicted upon him the Dutch rub. Which exercise, as every one knows, consists in currying a man's head with the bare knuckles. When Racey had yelped "Uncle" several times, and a perfect understanding had been established, they desisted from their labours and rolled cigarettes in flawless amity.

"Yuh don't guess there's twenty or thirty in the gang, do yuh?" asked Racey, when his cigarette was burning properly.

"Which I should say not. Stahl's crazy. Twenty or thirty! Hell's bells, can yuh see a gang o' road agents splittin' what they steal twenty or thirty ways? I can't, an' my eyesight's as good as the next feller's. In the first place none of 'em would make enough, an' in the second twenty or thirty would make the risk too big. Somebody'd shore snitch. No, sirree, I'm tellin' yuh there ain't more'n six or seven at the outside."

"That's twelve or fourteen thousand wheels," announced Racey Dawson.

"Eef we have de luck, ten t'ousan'," qualified Laguerre.

"Whatsa matter with ten thousand split three ways?" observed Johnny. "She's a lot more'n we'll earn wrastlin' cows."

"Shore," said Racey. "When'll we go?"

"The sooner the quicker, but we gotta see Jack Richie first, Racey, an' Telescope'll want to go back to the Bar S. To-day's Tuesday. S'pose we meet here Thursday an' start then."

"Dat ees all fine," declared Laguerre, "but we do not wan' for ride to de Ben' togedder."

"An' why not?" inquired Johnny.

"Well den, tree men ridin' een togedder weel mak de road agent' ask de question, *bien sûr*."

"Never thought o' that. We'll have to go one at a time. Who goes first?"

CHAPTER IV

THE NORTHERN TRAIL

DEED Jack mak de row w'en you say you wan' for go?" asked Laguerre, when the three met two days later.

"Naw," grinned Racey, "jus' says, 'Oh, I s'pose so. Soon's you chunkers get any money yuh gotta canter out an' spend her.'"

"Give us our time an' says not to get too drunk," said Johnny. "Drunk! If he only knowed he'd give up his job o' managin' the Cross-in-a-box an' come along."

"He don't an' he won't," chuckled Racey. "C'mon, Johnny, what yuh waitin' for? She's Thursday afternoon already. Maybe now yuh'd like me to take yore turn?"

"Not so's yuh could notice it," returned Johnny. "Li'l Mister Racey drewed the shortest piece o' grass, an' li'l Mister Racey'll follow Telescope like he'd oughta."

"Well, maybe," grumbled Racey, "but I don't take no roustabout's job at the stage corral, yuh can bet on that."

Within ten minutes Johnny Ramsay was on the trail leading to Paradise Bend. He rode at a trot, for there were some two hundred miles of side-hill and flat in front of his horse's nose, and the lope is not a long-distance gait.

On a morning, three days later, where the trail topped a ridge and dropped down into a broad basin where red willows and cottonwoods grow beside a shallow creek Johnny stopped to tighten his cinches. When the saddle

was nailed fast he swung up and rode onward, and as he rode he sang pleasingly of the fortunes of a certain Sweet Betsy from Pike. For he knew that the shallow creek was the Yellow Medicine, and that Paradise Bend was a scant twenty miles away.

And now the trail ran close beside the trees bordering the bank of the creek. The tired pony, grateful for the patches of shade, slowed of his own accord to a walk. A little breeze played among the cottonwoods and Johnny kicked his feet out of the stirrups and pushed back his hat the better to enjoy it. His singing dwindled to a tuneful hum, barely to be heard above the voice of the creek bubbling to itself in the shallows. Through the gaps in the trees Johnny saw the lush green of the sun-drenched flats on the other side of the creek. On his own side the ground rose in rounded swoops to the rock-crowned summit of a high and hump-backed hill where jackpines and spruce grew among the outcrops.

A mile ahead a pine-clad spur of the hill sprawled downward to the very bank of the creek. Here a way for the trail had been cut through the trees. In Johnny's opinion the spot where the trail bent in among the cottonwoods was an ideal place for a hold-up.

"A team's gotta slow for the turn, ain't they, feller?" he said to his horse. "An' they's plenty cover on both sides. I remember they used to be two big rocks about twenty feet up from the road among them pines. A gent could lay behind 'em all salubrious an' happy an' ventilate most anythin' he'd a mind to. Kind o' funny, but they ain't never been a hold-up just right there that I know of."

Crack! Crack! Crack! Three flat reports sounded faintly on the trail ahead. Johnny promptly jerked his

horse in among the cottonwoods. He dragged the Winchester from the holster under his left leg, and clicked a cartridge into the barrel. He lowered the hammer to safety and rode forward through the trees.

"They wasn't shootin' at me," he reflected. "Not for a minute. It's a hold-up, no two ways about it. An' right where they've never had one. This is shore luck."

But there are many kinds of luck. This was one of those kinds. Johnny was halfway from the ideal spot for a hold-up when, coming to a crook in the bank of the creek, he had an excellent view of a stretch of water a half-mile in the clear and three horsemen fording it briskly. As the riders were at the very end of the half-mile stretch and, furthermore, disappeared almost on the instant among the trees of the farther bank, Johnny neither shouted nor shot. In the one case they could not have heard him above the noise of their own passing, and in the other a law-abiding person may not cut down without some shred of evidence betokening evil intent. Of pursuit there was no question. Johnny's tired horse was utterly incapable of any exercise so violent.

Johnny promptly took to the trail and, by dint of spurring and lavish use of the quirt, the pony was persuaded into a slow gallop.

Among the cottonwoods, where the trail turned aside to skirt the spur, Johnny halted his trembling pony. For his expectations of the worst were fulfilled. Tragedy at her blackest had been abroad, and departing had left behind her in the trail a dead horse and two dead men.

The dead horse lay between the shafts of a buckboard. Of the two dead men one hung face downward over the dash, the other lay with arms all abroad across the seat, his eyes staring at the hot, bright sky.

Johnny glanced across the creek. On the farther bank at this spot the cottonwoods grew but thinly, and he saw between the boles a mile-wide opening between two hills. Through this opening he glimpsed the treeless slope of the long ridge beyond. Up this slope three dots were crawling.

Johnny coolly flicked up his backsight to extreme range, cocked his rifle, caught a steady rest against a cottonwood trunk and fired twice at those well-bunched dots. They were horsemen and the horses, two chestnuts and a black-tail dun, were hued precisely as were the horses the three men had galloped across the creek a few minutes before.

Johnny stepped past the thinning smoke-cloud and squinted at the distant slope. The three riders were still riding on, and they did not appear to be hurrying to any extent.

"No go," mourned Johnny, and jammed his Winchester down against a cottonwood. "Can't hit 'em at this range—that's a cinch. No sir, Daisy Belle, yuh gotta carry just about six hundred yards more before yuh'd do me a bit o' good to-day."

Daisy Belle was what he called his Winchester. Johnny could not pull or shoot a six-gun as could Tom Loudon, the Bar S foreman, but with the long arm he had yet to meet his equal. Prone, kneeling or standing, from the hip or shoulder, over all ranges, Johnny Ramsay was an expert. And now he felt himself and his pet grievously insulted that the men at whom he had just shot had not been within range by a few yards at least.

With a sigh Johnny went to examine the dead men in the buckboard. There was not much to see. A bullet had neatly traversed the head of each, and turned-out pockets testified to the thoroughness with which they had been robbed.

"They only left 'em their six-shooters," said Johnny, "an' a sawed-off shotgun."

He picked up the latter firearm. It was an eight-gauge Greener, a weapon much affected by bartenders and Wells-Fargo guards. Johnny's eyes strayed to the two boulders wedged between pine trees on the steep slope above the trail.

"Bet that's where they hid out," he muttered and laid the shotgun down on the seat, and walked round the buckboard preparatory to climbing the acclivity. But Johnny was not destined to investigate the place of ambush that day.

Even as he stepped across the trail there broke on his ear from the direction of the Bend the lively thudding of a galloping horse. Johnny slid silently to the tree against which his rifle leaned. But he did not pick up the Winchester. Instead he leaned against the tree trunk and made himself a cigarette. Mechanically his fingers shaped the white roll, for his eyes were engaged in observing the approaching rider. He saw that the man looked neither to the right nor left, but rode with his eyes fixed on the opening in the trees into which the trail plunged.

Johnny, standing well back and behind three trees, stood in a perfect concealment. He stuck his unlighted cigarette between his lips, hooked his thumbs in his belt, crossed one foot over the other, and waited.

The horseman rocked out of the open sunshine into the shadow of the trees and at sight of the buckboard slowed his horse to an easy halt. There was a certain keen eagerness in the gaze of the rider as he stared at the buckboard and what lay therein and, at Johnny's horse where it stood with lowered muzzle blowing the dust about on the surface of the trail.

The horseman was not a man to whom Johnny's heart went out. Plump and well-built, his hands were white and fat, and the dark hair showing beneath his white hat was slick with pomatum. Irresistibly, he brought to Johnny's mind that predatory night-runner, the crafty coyote. For the man's nose was long and thin and pointed and his ears matched his nose, and his chin matched his ears most marvelously. Johnny bet himself that the eyesockets were long and pointed too. Johnny coughed abruptly.

"I win," he announced, and calmly proceeded to light his cigarette. "I should 'a' said slantin' too," he added between puffs, referring to the other's eyes.

The horseman continued to regard him fixedly.

"What do you mean by 'slantin' too'?" he inquired, after a space.

"The sunbeams," replied Johnny, with a vacant stare. "Don't yuh see how they slant like through the leaves? Not that it's any of yore business."

The stranger's wide mouth broadened into a wintry smile. But his pale blue eyes, like other eyes into which Johnny had stared now and again, were mirthless. They perfectly bore out the threat of the wintry smile.

"Didn't know I was here till I coughed, didja?" said Johnny. "I didn't know whether to cough or not," he added artlessly.

"Didn't you?"

"No, I didn't."

With a suddenness that was startling the stranger threw back his head and laughed. Oddly enough, it was a hearty, comradely laugh, the laugh that springs from a cheerful heart at peace with all the world. Furthermore, so great was the stranger's ecstasy that he reeled in the saddle.

When the man lowered his chin there were tears in his eyes. He wiped these away with a very large and very white handkerchief, and smiled anew. And now his smile was no longer wintry. It held all the bright promise of a fair and summer day. And his eyes, so lately full of chill menace, were warm with sportive waggishness. But Johnny liked him none the better, and watched him, if that were possible, a thought more closely.

"There seems to have been an accident," observed the stranger, nodding toward the buckboard.

"I dunno as I'd call it exactly that," corrected Johnny.

"What would you call it then?"

The blue eyes lost a trifle of their jocularly.

"I dunno," evaded Johnny. "I wasn't here when it happened."

Was that relief in the stranger's eyes? Was it? Johnny could not be positive. He sagged back against the tree-trunk, and rubbed one ankle against the other. His cigarette hung loosely from a corner of his slack mouth. He stared blankly at the stranger.

The latter slowly turned his eyes away from Johnny to the buckboard. Slowly he dismounted and went to the buckboard and bent over the two dead men and examined their wounds. He raised his head and shot a quick look at the lack-luster Johnny.

"Didn't hear any shots fired, did you?" was his casual question.

"Three," replied Johnny.

The stranger gazed fixedly at the puncher. His hand strayed to his vest. Johnny, expecting the flash of a derringer, dropped his own right hand slightly. But the stranger merely fished a cigar from an upper vest pocket. He bit off the end and struck a match. Whether he had

perceived the movement of Johnny's hand, Johnny could not tell.

"You heard three shots," observed the stranger, watching the blue smoke curl upward.

"I said so—once," drawled Johnny.

"I beg your pardon," the stranger hastened to say. "Of course, you said so—once. See anybody?"

"Three men," said Johnny.

"Three men," repeated the stranger calmly. "Three men. Quite a band. Which way did they go?"

Johnny told him. The stranger nodded.

"It's no use chasing them," he declared. "Still, the sheriff should be notified at once."

"Shore should," Johnny agreed heartily. "S'spose yuh ride right back to the Bend an' do it. Yore hoss looks fresher'n mine."

"We might as well go together," suggested the stranger. "They've got such a start the posse won't be able to do much."

"Nothin' like tryin'. If I was you I'd climb on my hat-rack an' pull my freight prompt an' sudden to the Bend. An' say, howdja know I'm goin' to the Bend, anyhow?"

"This is how," remarked the stranger, and at the instant of his speaking Johnny looked into the stubby twin barrels of a derringer.

How the other had obtained the drop was a complete mystery to Johnny. Some of his surprise was manifest in his expression, and the stranger laughed.

"Didn't see my hand move, did you?" said he.

"Shore didn't," acknowledged Johnny, his upraised arms bending inward the brim of his hat. "What for a play is this, huh?" he added without anger. "You don't look like a road agent."

The other laughed aloud.

"Road agent!" he cackled. "Me! That's a good one, stranger. I've been called a lot of names during my life, but I've never been called a road agent till now."

"Yuh'll be called worse things than that, if yuh don't lemme put my hands down soon," averred Johnny.

"You'll be called a corpse if you start putting them down before I give the word."

"I thought at first this was a joke, but I see now it ain't. She's serious, — serious. My arms are beginnin' to ache. If you want my money, she's yores, the whole five dollars an' six bits. Anythin' I can do to help, just lemme know. Always glad to oblige. That's me."

"Step away from the tree—that's it. Now turn around—you can drop your arms and face me, if you like."

Johnny wheeled. The stranger was stuffing Johnny's six-shooter into the waistband of his trousers. Johnny's rifle was propped against the hind wheel of the buckboard. Lacking the friendly weight in the holster against his leg, Johnny felt strangely lonely. It was the first time in his life that he had been disarmed.

"Now," said the stranger, "if you'll oblige me by mounting your horse we'll go back to the Bend."

"That's all right. But whyfor, stranger, whyfor?"

"You'll find out when we reach the Bend. Climb aboard. I've told you once."

Johnny swung up and rode past the buckboard. The stranger, displaying an agility extraordinary in one of his build, gained his own saddle without losing the magic of the drop. Reaching down he picked up Johnny's Winchester by the barrel and laid it across his lap.

"Let's start," was the stranger's suggestion. "And if

I were you I wouldn't look round too much. In the first place, it isn't necessary. I'll be right here. And in the second, your horse might stumble and throw you over his head. Why run the risk?"

"Shore," agreed Johnny. "Why?"

CHAPTER V

PARADISE BEND

THE name was half true. The town was situated at the bend of the Dogsoldier River where it loops between the yellow brown of Old Baldy Mountain and the dark green of the Government Hills. But it was no paradise. And certainly it conveyed not the remotest suggestion of Elysium to Johnny's mind as he entered it on that very hot afternoon, with the stranger and the stranger's derringer at his horse's tail. Of course the affair would be adjusted within a few minutes. Sheriff Stahl would attend to that. Johnny's chief trouble was the rank humiliation of his position. He was not accustomed to being ridiculous.

The Bend, slightly larger than Farewell, prided itself on two stores, a Wells-Fargo office, two dance-halls and five saloons. The wide and straight main street and three crooked side streets were a riotous nightmare of false fronts, misspelt signs, boxsided shacks and log houses.

An indolent citizen roosting in a tip-tilted chair against the wall of the Wells-Fargo office was the first to glimpse the new arrivals.

"What yuh got, Harry?" he called without moving.

"Road agent," replied the stranger. "Caught him right at work."

By this time the indolent citizen was out on the street,

running hard in the direction of a horse tied at the hitching-rail in front of the Three Card saloon.

"I'll get my rope," the erstwhile indolent one bawled over his shoulder. "She's brand new."

"Road agent, huh?" cried Johnny, swinging his horse about. "You —— liar!"

"Put 'em up!" ordered the stranger, aiming the derringer.

"I won't," yelled Johnny, torn with rage. "I ain't got no gun! Yuh know I ain't! I dare yuh to shoot!"

The stranger did not shoot. He laughed.

"All right," he said. "Suit yourself. You'll be lynched so soon it doesn't really matter. Only—don't try to run."

From private residences, saloons, dance-halls and stores, came hurriedly the inhabitants of the Bend. Male and female, they clustered round Johnny and his captor and demanded details and the rope. Two prominent citizens, alive to their public duty, pulled Johnny from his horse. The puncher, shoved and jostled by the curious, ceased not to clamour for the sheriff.

"Shut up, for Gawd's sake!" importuned one of the men holding his arms. "Y'act like yuh had some rights."

Johnny did not obey, and the man ill-advisedly clapped a large and dirty hand over the prisoner's mouth. Johnny promptly bit his thumb. The man yelled and cuffed Johnny alongside the head. Johnny immediately wrenched both arms free and fell foot and fist upon the cuffer.

Johnny had barely thirty seconds to work in before being wrenched from his prey by seven men. Nevertheless the result was most creditable. The cuffer dragged himself upright, spat out two teeth and a mouthful of blood, and tenderly fingered a flattened nose and a torn ear.

"By Gawd!" mumbled the cuffer. "By Gawd!"

"Sic him again, Joe!" cried a derisive voice in the rear of the crowd. "What yuh afraid of? There's eight men holdin' him!"

"Who said that!" bellowed Joe the cuffer, making a great show of seeking out the owner of the voice while the crowd roared its appreciation of the incident.

"Say, I want the sheriff!" yelled Johnny for the thirty-first time hand-running.

"Take it easy," advised one of his captors. "Yuh don't need no sheriff, nohow. Stop yore squallin', there's a good feller."

"There's a good nothin', yuh fool!" retorted Johnny. "The sheriff knows me. He'll tell yuh I ain't a road agent."

"That's what they all say," smiled the other. "Sorry we can't oblige yuh. But the sheriff ain't here. He's out some'ers romancin' round after a hoss thief, an' we can't wait till he gets back."

Including the sheriff, Johnny's list of friends in the Bend was limited to some half-dozen people. There were Scotty Mackenzie and his outfit, of course, but Scotty's ranch, the Flying M, was ten miles out of town.

"Get Jim Mace an' Soapy Ragsdale!" cried the desperate Johnny. "They know me. So does Cap'n Burr an' his family. Hell's bells, don't I get no chance a tall?"

"No more'n yuh gave other folks," was the serene counter. "Can't yuh keep quiet? I wanta hear what yuh done."

"Johnny!" exclaimed a surprised voice. "Hello, Johnny. What's the trouble?"

A tall, big-boned man with square features plowed through the crowd, speaking as he came. The big man halted in front of Johnny and seized his hand where it

showed beneath the other hands holding wrist and forearm.

"Whatsa matter?" demanded the big man, pumping violently.

"These idjits say I'm a road agent," explained Johnny.

"Then they are idjits," averred the bold Mister Mace.

"Road agent! Here comes Soapy."

The storekeeper Ragsdale pushed up and repeated the pump-handle process on Johnny's hand.

"Shore glad to see yuh, Johnny," he assured the prisoner.

"Huh?—Road agent! We'll see about that. Hi, Buster!"

he shouted to his small son, a goggle-eyed child of ten who was gaping at the prisoner from between the bow legs of a lengthy cowboy, "chase over to the store an' get my Spencer carbyne. Skip, now."

Buster skipped and the crowd stilled its clamour somewhat. The hearty greeting of the prisoner by two such men as Jim Mace and Soapy Ragsdale was having its effect. The stranger who had captured Johnny rode forward and smiled engagingly down at Jim Mace and Soapy Ragsdale. They returned his smile with dispassionate stares.

"I said your friend is a road agent," he remarked quietly.

"I still say so. About three hours ago I found him standing beside Old Man Fane's buckboard. In the buckboard were Old Man and Bill Homan dead as Julius Cæsar, the pair."

"The dust!" gasped the Wells-Fargo agent. "The dust! Old Man Fane had two thousand ounces with him! He was takin' it to Marysville!"

"There was no dust in the buckboard," declared the stranger. "Both bodies had been robbed."

A great silence descended upon the crowd. Johnny

could hear the rasp of a new rope being uncoiled. He reiterated his innocence and demanded that the sheriff be sent for. There was an instant cackle of uncheerful laughter. Old Man Fane had been popular in the Bend. Johnny endeavoured to give his version of the affair. The cruel laughter smothered his utterance.

"No use waitin'," suddenly exclaimed the citizen who had been the first to glimpse the arrival of Johnny and the stranger. "There's evidence enough for forty men, gents. Here's the rope."

"Here's my carbyne!" rebutted Mister Ragsdale earnestly, plucking that seven-shooting firearm from the clutch of his panting offspring. "I ain't makin' no threats, not a threat, but yuh can put down a bet there's a-goin' to be a whole lot more evidence before anybody's gets hung. An' that's the branch I live on."

"We'll see about that!" shouted a voice from the crowd.

"If the gent will step out from where he's a-hidin' I'll be glad to argue with him," said Ragsdale silkily.

The crowd did not laugh, and no one stepped out from anywhere. Mister Ragsdale evidently belonged to a species quite different from that of the prominent citizen whose thumb Johnny had bitten to the bone. Ragsdale waited a dignified minute, then, no overt act occurring, he turned on the stranger.

"Slay," said he, "where's the two thousand ounces Old Man Fane was packin'?"

"How do I know where this man hid it?" rejoined the stranger.

"Oh, he hid it, did he?" Jim Mace remarked with sarcasm. "Hid it, an' then waited for you to come along an' corral him. Is that it?"

"I guess he wasn't really intending to wait," smiled

Slay, refusing to take offense. "You see, I came upon him unexpectedly."

"Gents!" cried Johnny, "you ain't had any real evidence yet. So far she's just his word against mine, an' my word's as good as his."

"We know him, an' we don't know you," returned a citizen with a dyed mustache.

"Soapy an' me know him!" blazed Jim Mace.

"O' course, o' course," soothed Dyed Mustache, whose name was Ganey, "but there's us. We got opinions, an' I tell yuh, Jim, I don't like the looks o' this jigger. He may be yore——"

"May be?" Thus, coldly, Mister Mace.

"He is yore friend," Ganey hastily corrected himself, and continued. "But when did yuh see him last?"

"Two years," Jim Mace admitted reluctantly.

"There!" Ganey exclaimed in triumph. "Two years! Why, say, Jim, that's a long time, two years is. I've seen hosses turn bronc in less'n two years. Why couldn't a gent do the same?"

"Some gents might," Jim Mace remarked meaningly, "but not Johnny Ramsay."

"We dunno that," averred Ganey. "We dunno nothin' about him. But he shore looks hard, an' lookit where Harry Slay found him—standin' right alongside the buckboard, with Old Man Fane an' Bill Homan dead an' all. It shore don't look right, it don't. I've seen men stretched for a lot less, a whole lot less."

Ganey hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, swelled out his chest, and looked about him for approval.

"Where did they find you, Johnny?" asked Ragsdale.

"At the buckboard, like he says," replied Johnny, "but——"

"Hear that!" shouted the officious Ganey. "He admits it! What are we waitin' for? Where's that rope?"

Ragsdale's carbine immediately covered Ganey's abdomen.

"Maybe this is why yo're waitin', Ganey," said he.

The crowd split away from Ganey. The latter was attracting entirely too much attention, and Soapy Ragsdale was known as a touchy gentleman utterly reckless of consequences.

"Oh, be reasonable, Soapy," urged Slay. "It isn't necessary to pull on any one. We're all friends here."

"All this talk o' ropes ain't friendly," complained the fretful Mister Ragsdale. "Besides, it makes me nervous, an' I don't like it."

"For Gawd's sake, Soapy, point that carbyne some'ers else," Ganey implored distressfully. "Yuh got the — thing cocked."

"An' I got my finger on the trigger, if yo're a-lookin' for real information," returned Ragsdale calmly. "I don't like this here bellerin' round for ropes, an' I don't give a — who knows it."

"I was just a-askin'," apologized Ganey. "It seemed natural—considerin'."

"You must admit, Soapy," ventured Slay, stepping forward, but carefully avoiding Ganey's immediate vicinity "you must admit that the evidence is fairly conclusive."

"Yo're another one that gives me a pain!" snapped Ragsdale. "S'pose yuh did find Johnny near the buckboard. S'pose they was forty dead men in it. It don't prove he done it, do it?"

"There's an empty shell in his rifle," put forth Slay. "Here she is."

Jim Mace seized the Winchester and worked the lever.

The ejector flipped out a spent shell. Jim Mace set the hammer at safety and picked up the shell.

"Nothin's proved yet," he said evenly.

"I fired two shots at the fellahs that done them killin's," explained Johnny.

"How many was they?" inquired Jim Mace.

"Three of 'em."

"Why didn't yuh say so before?" demanded Ragsdale's rival in trade, a cadaverous person named Dusen.

"Yuh didn't gimme no chance," retorted Johnny.

"Lemme tell my side of it now."

"We're simply wasting time," protested Slay. "The man's guilty as all hell. Nothing he may say can alter it. Why wait?"

Which sentiments coincided with those of the majority. There was a shuffling of feet and a slow shifting of positions. Slay smiled—slightly. Jim Mace's mouth became a thin, white line.

"They say yo're a good man on the draw, Slay," observed Jim Mace. "If yuh think yuh can beat the lead out o' this Winchester, hop to it. Now I'm tellin' yuh if they is any hangin', she's goin' to be after a trial—a reg'lar fair trial. An' I'm tellin' yuh too if they is any hangin' *before* the trial you won't be with us to pull on the rope."

Slay looked from the muzzle of the Winchester bearing on his stomach to the serene features of Jim Mace.

"Why, of course," he agreed, with admirably simulated heartiness. "A trial, by all means. I should be the last to impede the wheels of justice."

"I hoped yuh'd see our way of it," Jim Mace said drily.

Then came a large man with a brown beard and a marshal's star, demanding, after the fashion of police officers, the reasons for drawn weapons. Several endeavoured to

enlighten him, but bull-voiced Jim Mace overrode them all and gave his version to the marshal.

"An' yuh know him, Dan," said Jim Mace in conclusion. "It's Johnny Ramsay, one o' the Cross-in-a-box outfit down on the Lazy. He's all right."

Dan Smith looked at Johnny.

"I remember him," was his grudging admission, "but I never said two words to him in my life. He's one o' Scotty's friends. I seen him once out at the Flying M."

"Oh, y'admit it, do yuh?" barked Ragsdale sarcastically. "Yo're a fine Injun, you are. She's a wonder to me yuh don't say yuh never seen him before."

"Yuh know well enough, Soapy, I'm a officer o' the law," protested the marshal. "I can't go sympathize with nobody."

"— yore sympathy!" snorted truculent Ragsdale. "Who wants the thing? We don't. We can look out for ourselves, an' we're a-goin' to, y'bet yuh."

"Now, Soapy, it don't do no good to talk that way," chided the marshal. "An' it don't sound good neither. She sounds like yuh didn't care nothin' for law an' order."

"I don't," Ragsdale promptly assured him. "I don't give three hells an' a dam' for law an' order. I'm here to see justice done, an' that's a cat with another kind o' tail."

"But I'm here," offered the affronted marshal. "I'm paid to see justice done, so don't yuh worry."

"I ain't," returned Ragsdale. "Not one li'l bit."

"We gotta have a trial," proclaimed the marshal, endeavouring to appear unconscious of Ragsdale. "She's gotta be legal. We'll adjourn to the Golden Rule an' fight it out. There's plenty room there."

"An' there's a tree out back," supplemented one of the men holding Johnny.

"Oh yes, I was comin' to you, Spill," Jim Mace observed softly to the speaker. "S'pose yuh leggo that arm an' lemme take it—as a favour, a small li'l favour to oblige me, Spill."

Spill did not see his way clear to refuse. He reluctantly relinquished Johnny's right arm into the keeping of Jim Mace.

"Thought maybe yuh'd feel better havin' a gent yuh know around," remarked Jim Mace, giving Johnny's biceps a friendly pressure. "How's tricks down on the Lazy?"

"Comin' in bunches," Johnny grinned, winking a cool eye at Jim.

"Say, Tom," observed Jim Mace, leering across at the man on the prisoner's left, "how about sort o' lettin' go entirely o' my friend's arm? It ain't really necessary, yuh know."

Tom Keen was one of Slay's friends. He wore a hard look and two guns. Nevertheless he followed Jim Mace's suggestion without hesitation.

"Seein' as it's you, Jim, I don't mind none at all," affirmed Tom in the endeavour to save his face. "We all know you."

"Shore yuh do," said Jim Mace with a wicked smile. "We're all for justice an' a quiet life in this town—huh? All right, Dan, we're with yuh."

But they were not with Dan—not just yet. A very pretty girl stepped plump in front of the prisoner and held out her hand. Her breath was coming fast as though she had been running, and her ardent dark eyes were sparkling, and her cheeks were very red.

"How are you, Mister Ramsay?" she said clearly. "Don't you remember me?"

"Do I?" cried Johnny. "Well, say!"

At which the pretty girl blushed redder than ever and the crowd snickered. But little Johnny cared for the crowd. Tactful Jim Mace immediately loosed his grip on Johnny's arm, and the puncher seized the girl's fingers in a fervid grasp.

"I shore am glad to see yuh!" he exclaimed, pumping energetically, and noting with distinct pleasure that the man Slay seemed hugely displeased thereat. "How's yore ma an' pa, Miss Burr?"

"They're all fine. Pa's out on the route just now, an' ma's over at Mis' Acker's on Jack Creek. Soon's Mis' Mace told me you were in trouble I chased young Sammy Barnes out after ma. That's why I was so long getting here. I almost had to fight Sammy to make him do what I wanted. He wanted to see the excitement, the blood-thirsty brat."

"Yuh say yuh sent for yore ma?" demanded the marshal in dismay.

"I certainly did," replied Miss Burr, sharply. "If Sammy's horse doesn't fall down she ought to be here within two hours."

"C'mon!" ordered the marshal, seizing Johnny by the arm. "Get a gait on. We gotta hurry."

"Scared, are yuh, old-timer?" laughed Miss Burr. "I guess you know what'll happen when ma gets here, don't you? Remember what she called you when you played the fool in that Loudon case?"

"You bet he remembers, Dor'thy!" giped the shrill voice of Mrs. Ragsdale. "Lookit him, gettin' all red. If he'd only wash his face now an' then, he'd get redder."

Which mordant if inelegant jest was salty with truth, for the marshal was a bachelor and careless in his habits. The crowd whooped its appreciation, and the marshal

almost broke a tooth in his efforts to maintain a dignified silence.

"Whatsa matter, fellah?" fleered Johnny. "Yore jaw-muscles look like they was a-goin' to bust plumb through yore cheeks. Are yuh mad or somethin'?"

The marshal answered not, and Johnny grinned. His spirits were returning, and in full force. Loyal friends are indeed the best little heart-uplifters in the world.

CHAPTER VI

THE HEMPEN SHADOW

PARADISE BENDERS, so many as could find room, crowded into the Golden Rule at the tail of the group surrounding Johnny. The disappointed ones filled the open window-spaces with eager heads and shoulders, to the mental anguish of Dave Dusen, who feared for his precious panes. But the possible shattering of window-glass was not the only fly in the proprietor's amber. Two boxes of crackers and one of prunes stood invitingly open to the public gaze and hand.

"Them prunes ain't samples!" wailed Dave, diving behind his counter. "They're for sale! They cost money! Take yore hoofs out o' that box, will yuh, Tom? That goes for the crackers, too! Here, I'll stick 'em under the counter till court's over."

But half the crackers and most of the prunes had disappeared before Dave was able to sequester his property. It was almost a perfect day for the crowd. Soapy Ragsdale cocked a mocking eye at Dan Smith and smiled sweetly. For well he knew that the marshal, in selecting the Golden Rule as the place in which to hold court, had intended thereby to slight him, Soapy, and correspondingly do honour to Dave Dusen. Which honour had proved a brisk boomerang and seriously strained an ancient friendship. It was almost a perfect day for Soapy too.

The marshal opened court, constituted himself judge,

appointed twelve jurors and lined them up along the counter.

"A jury ain't really necessary," said the marshal; "she's such a plain open-an'-shut case. But we gotta be legal, so pernickety folks'll be satisfied."

"Meanin' me an' Jim, I s'pose," chuckled the irrepressible Ragsdale. "Why don't yuh say so right out, instead o' climbin' all round the stump thisaway?"

"I wasn't namin' no names," was the marshal's lame retort.

"I notice yuh didn't name our names none when yuh picked yore jury," Jim Mace observed drily.

"Well, I'm tryin' to be fair," the marshal explained, "an' you two fellers are the prisoner's friends too much."

"Don't he talk sensible," remarked Johnny. "If Mister Smith tries any harder to be fair he'll strain his conscience or somethin'. An' then where'll he be?"

"Yo're too fresh, young feller," reproved the hard-faced Tom, one of the jurors. "Yuh better talk slow around here—sort o' hogtie yore tongue a few."

"Is that so?" flung back Johnny, anxious to waste all the time he could. "How many gents have you downed?"

"Shut up!" bawled the marshal, hammering with a bung-starter on a barrel of vinegar. "Not another yap out o' you! You don't seem to realize none how nice yo're bein' treated."

"Don't make me laugh," begged Johnny.

"I expect we won't." Grimly from Slay.

"Friend Slant-Eye again," Johnny acknowledged good-humouredly. "You won't never be satisfied till yuh see me hung, will yuh?"

"You better believe I won't!" With enthusiasm.

"It'll shore be a shame to disappoint yuh, Slant-Eye,"

commiserated Johnny. "Can yuh stand it, do yuh think?"

Such flippancy did not please the crowd. It turned ugly again. But Jim Mace and Soapy Ragsdale faced it down to the marshal's patent disgust. It was apparent that he would welcome almost any quick and sure method of disposing of the prisoner. Miss Burr, wedged in between plump Mrs. Mace, thin Mrs. Ragsdale and a knobbly sack of potatoes, smiled reassuringly at Johnny. He grinned back, winked happily, and thrust his tongue into his cheek as Slay began to repeat the story of the crime and the arrest. Even as he had stuck to the truth in the street so now did he stick to the truth in the Golden Rule. But Slay was undeniably clever, and a clever man may give Truth a bit of covering here and there to conceal her nakedness withal, to the end that the lady appears of a totally different aspect. With devilish cunning he contrived to blend argument and statement of fact so that the two were one.

When Slay sat down and tranquilly lit a cigar Johnny perceived that he must fight for his life in harsh earnest. He knew that Jim Mace and Soapy Ragsdale would see it through in the smoke if the verdict went against him, a contingency involving their deaths as well as his own. Two men can not successfully combat a whole town. Johnny, after listening to Slay's remarks, rather doubted the ability of Mrs. Burr to save him. Even if she could she might not arrive in time. Furthermore, it would be humiliating to owe his life to a woman. It will be seen that Johnny's peculiar dilemma presented a more numerous array of horns than nature allots to the average cows.

Johnny stood up on his feet and, taking a long breath, prepared to plunge in. Then he almost laughed aloud,

for the way out had suddenly opened before him with farcical ease. With unhurried fingers he rolled a cigarette one-handed and snapped a match alight with his thumb-nail. He turned to Jim Mace.

"Jim," he said, "have yuh got that spent shell yuh pumped out o' my Winchester?"

Jim Mace silently handed him the cartridge case. Johnny held the case upright before the eyes of the marshal. Along the length of the brass cylinder ran two bright parallel scratches.

"Yuh seen Jim pump this spent shell out o' my gun, didn't yuh?" asked Johnny.

"Yeah," nodded the marshal.

A quiver of interest rippled through the crowd. Dorothy Burr nudged Mrs. Mace and Mrs. Ragsdale with her elbows, and smiled delightedly.

"He's thought of something," she whispered. "I can see it in his eye."

Her friends smiled back. In common with most women they possessed the instinct for romance, and they sensed in the situation heart-interest a-plenty.

"Would yuh mind pumpin' out the magazine, Jim?" said Johnny.

Jim Mace promptly began to work the lever of the Winchester. Seven loaded shells clattered on the floor. These shells Johnny picked up and held for the marshal to inspect. The jury he had disregarded from the first.

"See, old-timer," observed Johnny. "They's two scratches on the side of each one o' these shells, just like they was on the spent shell, ain't they?"

"Yeah." Again the marshal nodded after the fashion of a china mandarin.

"Now I want an unbusted box o' 45-90 cartridges,"

continued Johnny. "Huh?— To prove my case. What yuh guess?— No, I don't wanna load the rifle myself. I want you to do it. Hurry up with that box. Mister Smith's in a hurry. Here y'are, Mister Smith. Just snick round the edge with yore finger-nail, will yuh, an' take the cover off? That's the ticket. Take out six or seven o' them shells an' look at 'em close. Don't see no scratches or nothin' do yuh? All a smooth yaller, ain't they?—They are, you admit it. Now load 'em into my rifle an' then pump 'em out."

"Say, what kind o' foolishness is this," snarled the marshal, "loading an' unloadin' yore Winchester thisaway? Djuh think I'm a idjit?"

"I know you are, old-timer," Johnny replied calmly. "Yuh needn't apologize. I know yuh can't help it. S'pose now yuh do what I say like a good fellah."

The "good fellah," amid the happy chortlings of the mercurial crowd, slowly stuffed half-a-dozen cartridges through the loading-gate into the magazine.

"Pump 'em out an' look at 'em," commanded Johnny. The marshal obeyed.

"See them twin scratches now," cried Johnny triumphantly. "Every last one's got 'em, ain't they? Shore they have. My loadin'-gate's nicked, an' every shell yuh stick in gets scratched thataway."

"What's that got to go with yore killin' Old Man Fane an' Bill Homan?" demanded the marshal.

"She's got a li'l bit to do with provin' I didn't kill Old Man Fane an' Bill Homan," retorted Johnny. "It'll be hard to prove it to yuh—yo're so half-witted, but I'll do my li'l old best. Yuh remember what I said about shootin' at the jiggers crossin' the Yellow Medicine right after I heard them three shots. I said I shot twice, didn't I?

All right. Yuh got the spent shell o' one o' them shots. Jim Mace pumped her out o' my rifle. The other shell yuh'll find near a cottonwood about ten feet from the place where Old Man Fane's buckboard is standin' in the trail. That's the only shell o' mine yuh'll find anywhere around there.

"An' as I had a steady rest against that cottonwood with my back to the road when I cut down on them three gents yuh'll find the spent shell between the cottonwood an' the road. It ought to be plain to yuh from that I didn't bushwhack Fane. If I had I'd 'a' been *behind* the cottonwood, an' the spent shell would 'a' been between the tree an' the creek. Then again yuh'll find the marks o' my heels where I stood when I fired. I remember the ground was soft, an' they sunk in some. An' them heel-marks'll be on the buckboard side o' the cottonwood tree."

"Aw, we ain't got no time for that!" objected the hard-faced Tom.

"That's shore hard luck," mourned Johnny, "but I don't wanna be hung none, so I'll just go on an' finish my li'l piece—if yuh haven't any objection. I wouldn't want to do anythin' to make yuh mad or nothin'. Me bein' a orphan I gotta be careful what I do an'——"

"G'on! G'on!" snapped the marshal.

"Why shore," assented Johnny. "I was just goin' to say that the lead that killed Old Man Fane an' Bill Homan an' the hoss all come from above an' from the other side o' the road. I dunno neither o' them men personal, but I take it that Old Man Fane was the gent with the white beard—— Yeah, he was, huh? All right, the bullet that killed Old Man Fane went in above the right temple, come out below the left ear an' grazed his left shoulder.

The other feller was shot plumb through the temple, the bullet come out his neck, an' buried itself in his left shoulder.

"I dunno nothin' about the hoss exceptin' he was drilled back o' the ear. I didn't take notice where the bullet went after that. Now I'm gamblin' that behind the rocks scrouged in between two pines a-growin' maybe twenty—thirty feet up the side o' the hill where she's good an' steep yuh'll find three spent shells without any scratches on 'em. Maybe yuh won't. Them fellers might not 'a' pumped 'em out, but it'd be a heap natural for 'em to pump 'em out, bein' road agents an' likely to need their Winchesters quick an' in a hurry.

"Say! here's somethin' I didn't think of before: yuh know she's kind o' hard to judge the size of a bullet by the hole she makes in a gent—the flesh is too ragged, but the hole in Bill Homan's hat was a mite smaller than the hole in Old Man Fane's. *An' the lead's still in Homan's shoulder.* Dig her out, an' I'll gamble the limit yuh'll find she's 40-65 or 38 or somethin' like that. It's a cinch she ain't as big as mine, an' mine's the reg'lar 45-90. There y'are, Mister Smith. Yore proof is right in an' near that buckboard. Fly at it."

The marshal frowned. The jury and crowd did more than frown. They voiced immediate objections. Which was natural. An investigation of Johnny's side of the question would have been a rank departure from long-established methods of procedure. What was all this talk of bullet-holes and shooting from above and so forth? Foolishness! Hadn't Harry Slay told a straight and conclusive story?

Of course he had. Hells bells, what more did the road agent want? He was unreasonable, that's what he was.

Hadn't other men found in less criminal circumstances been hung at sight? Men pointed with pride and many oaths to the fact that they certainly had been so hung. Custom dies hard. Besides, it was nearly twenty miles to the Yellow Medicine, and it was a hot day.

The marshal glanced warily at Jim Mace and Soapy Ragsdale, for he had an uneasy feeling that, in the event of hostilities, he would be the first to die. Still—— The marshal coughed impressively and, while affecting to scratch his hip-bone, fingered the butt of his six-shooter.

"Gents," said the marshal, addressing the jury, "y'all heard what Harry Slay said. Y'all heard what this feller said. What do you say?"

"Yes, gents, what do you say?" drawled an unexcited voice from the doorway. "I'd shore admire to hear."

The marshal's jaw dropped with almost an audible click. He at once withdrew his hand from his gunbutt and ran a worried finger round the inside of his collar. Miss Burr laughed with an almost hysterical joy.

"Hello, Scotty!" called Johnny.

"Howdy, Johnny! I'll get to yuh in a li'l while. Hello, Dave. Seems kind o' crowded in here to-day. Trade a-boomin', huh?"

Scotty Mackenzie, eight of his riders in his wake, forced his way through the press. The jurors looked uncomfortable. The hard-featured Tom began to fidget. Ganey of the dyed mustache swallowed his chew and nearly strangled. Slay's friends quickly assumed their most innocent expressions. Slay himself appeared to be unmoved. He watched Scotty's approach with lazy eyes. The units comprising the remainder of the assemblage looked at one another and shifted their feet if not their opinions.

Scotty and his boys shook hands with Johnny and

gravely asked how he did. Of the nine men Scotty Mackenzie had the least inspiring presence. He was dilapidated with a startling completeness. His boots were ancient, sadly run over at the heels, and cut about the tops. His trousers were patched at one knee and ripped at the other. His vest was gone at the armholes and a pocket or two had fetched away. His blue flannel shirt had faded to a sickly green in many places. A large hole yawned in the crown of his flappy-brimmed hat, and through a smaller hole in the side his grizzled hair protruded.

Scotty wore a chin whisker and his features had been built with a view to service in the missionary field. But the effect of this mild, bland face was nullified by a pair of bright blue eyes that could, on occasion, become hard and fierce with a hardness and a fierceness usually associated with that interesting animal, the Bengal tiger. No indeed, Scotty Mackenzie was distinctly not a person to monkey with.

At the present moment Scotty was standing with his wiry legs planted well apart and was smiling pleasantly at the marshal. The latter had never seen a Bengal tiger, so he thought of the timber wolf instead. Scotty was a smaller man than the marshal, but somehow the marshal felt that he was looking up to Scotty. Dan Smith was no coward. He was not actually afraid of Scotty, yet he wished from the bottom of his heart that he had taken the prisoner's part a little more.

"I'm clean forgettin' the jury," Scotty drawled apologetically, and pivoted on one heel. "Gents, yuh was goin' to say somethin' when I got here. What was it?"

"They was just a-goin' to move to adjourn over to the Yaller Medicine about twenty miles," put in the marshal before a juryman could speak. "Seems like they's

some evidence there we gotta look at before decidin' this case."

"Oh, yeah," said Scotty. "Guess the boys an' me'll sort o' trail along. We ain't busy a li'l bit. Yuh see, I was standin' in that doorway a good ten minutes before anybody seen me."

CHAPTER VII

SCOTTY MACKENZIE

HERE'S a spent shell!" cried one of Scotty's outfit, a bristle-haired young man named Swing Tunstall. He handed the shell to Scotty, and the latter held it up for the marshal to see.

"Yuh'll notice Swing found her on the buckboard side o' that cottonwood about ten feet off the road," Scotty pronounced in a dry tone. "An' here's Johnny's twin scratches down the side. Le's go look for the heel-marks."

The presence of the heel-marks in the soft ground having been verified, twenty men including the jurors, Scotty and the marshal, climbed the steep slope to where the two boulders snuggled between their guardian pines.

Behind the boulders they found three spent shells—two 45-90's and one 40-65.

"Not scratched a bit, none of 'em," abserved Scotty. "Dug that bullet out o' Homan yet, Cal?" he called to an earnest seeker after light on the trail below.

"In a minute," replied Cal. "My knife done touched her all right, but she's kind o' behind a bone. She's a-comin'."

She came and was duly examined by the multitude.

"40-65 bullet," was Scotty's remark. "So Johnny didn't fire that cartridge. An' he didn't fire them two unscratched 45-90's neither. I guess that pretty near settles the cat-hop."

"Shore it does," the marshal affirmed with forced heartiness. "I guess the jury's satisfied. Gents, yo're——"

"But I ain't satisfied—yet," interrupted Scotty smoothly. "Yuh forget Johnny seen three jiggers cross the creek. We'll slide down and look at the tracks. An' while we're about it, we might just as well find out where they tied their hosses while they was bushwhackin' Old Man an' Bill. All them li'l things help, yuh know," he added plaintively.

No one was deceived by his tone. All accompanied him without demur. After quartering the ground for fifteen minutes Scotty and his followers halted in a pocket among the pines.

"Here's where they tied their hosses," announced Scotty. "Three hosses, an' by the looks o' the ground they was standin' here awhile. Le's go down to the creek."

They traced the tracks from the pocket to the creek, up the opposite bank, and out across the flats.

"I guess this is most enough," said Scotty, halting a hundred yards from the water.

"She was enough before," the hard-featured Tom assured him. "I guess we know when everythin's all right."

"I guess—maybe—yuh do," was Scotty's drawling endorsement.

But Scotty was not looking at Tom. The hard blue stare was directed straight into the pale eyes of Harry Slay. The latter promptly smiled in a most engaging fashion.

"This is fine," he declared without hesitation. "I am delighted that matters have turned out as they have, and that your friend gets a Scotch verdict—the benefit of the doubt, in other words."

"Benefit of the doubt." Thus Scotty, softly, almost tenderly.

"A slip of the tongue," beamed Slay, with a flash of white teeth. "I should have said 'unquestionably cleared of the charge against him'."

"Yeah, yuh should have," said Scotty. "Funny how folks don't always think o' the right thing to say."

"Surely is," agreed the good-humoured Slay. "Have a cigar?"

"Cigarettes kind o' suit my health better," parried Scotty, fishing out the makings.

"Better stick to 'em then," advised Slay, and began to walk away from there.

Swing Tunstall looked at his friend Jack McCall and rubbed a solemn chin. Jack thrust his tongue into his cheek. Later, in the bunk-house, they would recount with delight how their employer ran a blazer on Harry Slay and forced that plump person to say what he had not intended to say.

Scotty gave no evidence that he realized what he had done. Mildly he asked Tunstall for a match, lit his cigarette, and plodded slowly back to the buckboard with the others.

"Where's Harry?" queried a citizen named Carey.

"Started back," replied Cal Mason, busy at the buckboard. "Pass the rope under his arms, Tug, an' I'll tie 'em to the back of the seat."

"Naw," objected Tug, "put 'em both on the floor. S'pose their feet do hang over—what's the difference?"

"They ain't room, I tell yuh!" declared Cal heatedly. "They's only room for Bill Homan on the floor. Old Man's gotta sit alongside of yuh. Aw, what yuh beefin' about? He ain't bleedin' even a li'l bit! Lemme drive then. I can drive yore hoss better'n you anyhow," Cal added with consummate tact.

Tug drove.

On the ride back to the Bend, Johnny contrived to manœuvre Scotty to the tail of the cavalcade.

"Gotta fix my cinches," Johnny announced suddenly and, catching Scotty's eye, motioned rearward with his head.

The quick-witted Scotty halted his horse as Johnny slid to the ground. When Johnny swung up the others were three hundred yards ahead. Scotty grinned at Johnny, and Johnny grinned at Scotty. They liked each other very well, these two. Johnny knew better than to thank Scotty for coming to his rescue. He merely mentioned that Scotty had picked a good day on which to ride to town. Scotty "guessed" that this was the truth, and the subject was closed.

"Yuh wanna hire two stray men, don't yuh, Scotty," Johnny began abruptly.

"Who? Me? Two stray men? What yuh talkin' about, Johnny? This Territory ain't Texas."

"Yeah, but yuh want two stray men just the same. Yo're losin' a lot o' hosses lately, an' yuh don't like it nohow."

"It's shore makin' me madder'n —," said Scotty, falling into the spirit of the occasion. "What else?"

"An' yuh hire me'n Telescope."

"Laguerre!"

"Shore."

"Telescope Laguerre," chuckled Scotty, his face wrinkling with delight. "I'll shore be glad to see Telescope again."

"Yo're hirin' us won't cost yuh nothin', but nobody's gotta know that. To anybody she's forty a month all reg'lar."

"Shore. G'on. Don't stop. I can see times a-comin'."

"Our bein' stray men thisaway will give us a chance to ride the range so careless an' so free without folks askin' questions. They's three of us. While two is ridin' round the other'll get a job in the Bend—at the stage corral, if he can. If he can't, some'ers else where the hearin's good."

"I'm beginnin' to see," drawled Scotty. "I'm shore beginnin' to see. When yuh goin' to start in?"

"Right where them two fellahs was downed. I'm no trailer, myself, but Telescope is shore one li'l he-angel when it comes to readin' sign, an' I'm gamblin' he can find out somethin' from the hoof-marks of the hosses them hold-ups rode. If only she don't rain."

"She won't," declared Scotty. "If she rains inside o' six weeks, I'll eat my shirt. Them hoof-marks is there to stay. When yuh goin' to send for Telescope?"

"Telescope an' Racey Dawson are on the way now. Telescope'll drift in day after to-morrow likely, an' Racey a couple o' days after."

"Huh? Day after to-morrow?"

"Shore, day after to-morrow."

"Say, how long you been plannin' this thing anyhow?"

"Since the stage pulled in to Farewell after the Hogback hold-up an' Bill Stahl posted rewards for them bandits at a thousand per. The Wells-Fargo made the same play. I figure she beats punchin' cattle."

"An' yuh come north special for that?" Scotty's eyes took on a terrier-like keenness.

"Shore, I come north for that," replied Johnny. "What do yuh guess?"

"Seen Dor'thy?" was Scotty's apparently irrelevant remark.

"Yeah——Say, do yuh s'pose I come all the way here to see her?"

"Why not?" yapped Scotty defensively. "She's one nice li'l gal, an' any gent—any gent, I tell yuh, Johnny—had ought to be proud to ride from hell to breakfast and back again to see her."

"I dunno as my hoss'd stand the trip," doubted Johnny.

"Yuh know what I mean. Yuh know plenty well what I mean. An' I don't give a damn what yuh say, Johnny, I'm bettin' yuh was thinkin' o' Dor'thy all the time yuh was plannin' to come up here after them hold-ups. Shore yuh was, an' natural too. Hell yes. What yuh wigglin' round in the saddle for?"

"'Cause you make me sick!"

"I'll make yuh a heap sicker soon. Dor'thy's one nice gal."

"Yuh've done said that twice."

"Of course," pursued the unheeding Scotty, "I don't cotton to ladies as a rule. I've knowed several one time an' another, an' they're bad medicine. Yessir, I've had experience, I have, an' I've been gun-shy of 'em ever since. But Dor'thy Burr an' her ma ain't nothin' like the ordinary run of female women. Them two are reg'lar shore-enough *folks*, yuh bet yuh. Why, I knowed Dor'thy when she wasn't knee-high to a pack-rat an' said 'Gug-gug' when she wanted to play with yore watch. Busted mine three times, she did, an' throwed it in the stove final.

"The first time she ever rode a hoss in her life was on my saddle with her li'l legs a-stickin' straight out an' a-yellin' to make the hoss go. An' look at her now. They ain't a better-lookin' gal, bar none, north o' Texas. I ask yuh, is they? No, they ain't. O' course, on forty a month yuh hadn't really ought to ask her, but after yuh've hawg-

tied a bandit or two an' got the money then fly at it. Shore. Wish I was twenty year younger. I'd show yuh, yuh bet yuh."

"Yuh'd shore be welcome to," grunted Johnny. "I ain't out to get married—not yet awhile. An' I'm surprised at yuh, Scotty, a man o' yore age, talkin' this way."

"Why, yuh pore conceited cow-wrastler!" blazed Scotty. "Yuh don't guess I meant what I said about Dor'thy an' you, do yuh? I was funnin' yuh. If yuh had any sense yuh'd see it, but that's just the way, young folks nowadays ain't got the brains they had when I was a boy. No, sir, not by a jugful they ain't, an' you ain't in partic'lar, Johnny. Not but what y'ain't a right good feller. I like yuh quite a lot. I dunno why exactly. But you ain't the man for Dor'thy Burr. She's a friend o' mine."

"Ain't I a friend of yores?" demanded Johnny, somewhat injured as to his feelings.

"Shore y'are," admitted Scotty. "But this is different, a heap different. Yuh don't shape up like a married man, Johnny."

"I'd like to know why I couldn't."

"I thought yuh said yuh wasn't out to get married."

"I mean I'd like to know why I couldn't if I wanted to."

"I guess—maybe—yuh could. They say nothin's impossible. But it wouldn't do. No. Not a-tall nohow. Just you forget it an' think o' somethin' else. Besides, it might be right dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Dangerous."

Scotty wore an air of supreme indifference. He began to hum a little song.

"Nemmine dronin' no tunes. Whadda yuh mean by 'dangerous'?"

"I was just thinkin' o' Harry Slay."

"Harry Slay! Him! What's he got to do with Dorothy Burr?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin'. How's Jack Richie makin' out?"

"Nemmine Jack Richie either. He'll keep better'n that blisterin' tune. What's all this here mystery about Dorothy an' Slay?"

"It ain't no mystery. He slimes round Dor'thy all the time. Goes ridin' with her a lot, an' most every week the stage freights in a big box o' candy from him for her—all the way from St. Paul, too. Why, say, *he evens picks flowers out in the woods for her!*"

Had Slay been in the habit of constructing bouquets of rattlesnakes Scotty's tone could not have expressed more horrified disgust. Johnny was disgusted, too, but in a different way.

"Who is this man Slay?" he demanded.

"He owns the Broken Dollar S'loon—runs six games in there. I thought yuh knew."

"He's new since I was here."

"Yeah, sifted in lee'n two year ago, bought the Savin' Grace off Riley, renamed her the Broken Dollar, an' waded into business. I'll say this for him: he's an educated gent. a slayer over any distance with the women, a cold proposition with the men, an' I ain't got no more use for him than I have for a toad. Not so much. Yuh can squash a toad."

"An' he's goin' to see Dorothy?"

"What do you care?"

"I don't—only—only it don't seem right somehow. Not that she's anythin' to me more'n a friend, but he's a pup, that fellah."

"Shore, but how yuh goin' to stop it? He's acted real decent—so far. An' if yuh plug him or somethin' Dor'thy mightn't like it. Yuh can't never tell about a woman."

"But he ain't the gent to be hangin' round a nice girl like that. He's got a bad eye."

"Two of 'em, an' I ask yuh again, what yuh goin' to do? She's a free country."

"Yeh, but—why don't yuh talk to Mis' Burr?"

"An' get a jawin'? Do I look like a fool?"

"Sometimes," said Johnny, "but y' ain't to blame for that. I think it's yore complexion or somethin'. Leave my hoss alone! Quit it now! We was talkin' all friendly about Dorothy an' yuh gotta go raisin' — around. What are we goin' to do?"

"We?"

"Shore we?"

"An' do what, huh?"

"Show Mister Slay he ain't wanted."

"Not me, Johnny. I'm shore too old for them kind o' fireworks. It's yore play."

"Seein' as nobody else wants to pick up a hand," Johnny observed with sarcasm, "I guess maybe it is."

Scotty said nothing. Having sown the seed he was content to await the harvest.

"Goin' out to-night?" inquired Johnny, when the scattered lights of Paradise Bend winked at them across the night.

"Guess not," said Scotty. "Too late. We'll go to-morrow."

"I'll be out later—with Telescope," observed Johnny. "Not much use goin' out till after he comes. Besides, we gotta look at them tracks."

"Shore," concurred Scotty, grinning into the darkness. "They's all kinds o' reasons for yuh to stay in the Bend," he added under his breath.

"Whatcha say?" Johnny questioned suspiciously.

"Talkin' to the hoss."

From the windows and doorways of store, saloon and dance hall, flaring fans of yellow light lay across the sidewalks and stretched with diminishing intensity into the dust of the street. In the How Come You So Dance Hall two fiddlers were dispensing the heartsome strains of "Old Dan Tucker" and heavy boots and light slippers were scuffling and sliding over the floor. An intoxicated gentleman was roaring the "Days of Forty-Nine" in the Three Card, and from the Jacks Up came the merry cries of the bartender and the proprietor as they strove to eject an unwelcome customer.

"Good li'l town," was Scotty's comment.

"All o' that," said Johnny, watching with admiring interest the unwelcome customer issue from the Jacks Up, skitter across the sidewalk, and strike the street on the back on his neck.

"Lookit, lookit!" he urged delightedly, prodding Scotty.

"Yeah, that's Lotta Wallace," said Scotty, who was looking in the opposite direction. "Kind o' fancy, ain't she?"

"Huh? Who?" puzzled Johnny, thinking of the unwelcome customer.

"She'll strike the light again in a shake," Scotty continued to stare across the street, and Johnny, following with his eyes, got the range in time to see a woman step into the light from the doorway of the Golden Rule—a woman of dark and brilliant beauty, whose alluring black gown revealed and emphasized the charm of throat and

shoulders, shoulders that should have been covered by the white shawl she trailed over a bare and perfect forearm.

Johnny watched the slim figure shuttling through the light and darkness of the street till it disappeared within the entrance of the Broken Dollar.

"Lookout?" was his question.

"Sometimes," Scotty told him. "But mostly she spins the wheel. She's Slay's sister, Mis' Lotta Wallace, an' a widow—she says. Yuh can't tell, it might be true. Me, I always like to look at her. She makes me think o' when I was a barefoot kid back East in MacPherson an' the circus come to town an' for the first time in my life I seen a leopard. Yessir, it's shore amazin' how Mis' Wallace reminds me o' that leopard."

"Did she come here with Slay?"

"Yep—all the way from Chicago—if yuh believe what they say. Me personal I got a idea they're a long time from Lake Michigan—a long, long time. They was nothin' tenderfooty about either of 'em when they come. Yessir, a gent don't learn to pull a gun like Slay can pull her, back East. It ain't a city trick. An' that Lotta gal was born on a hoss.

"Johnny, I seen her ride Dan Smith's pitcher one day. Which that wall-eyed cayuse gave her all he knowed from sun-fishin' to changin' ends an' djuh think she pulled leather? Nary a pull. She stuck to him like grim death to a dead nigger an' loped him through town at the finish like nothin' had happened. But just the same," he added hastily, "she reminds me o' that leopard."

"Yeah," said Johnny, thinking of something else. "An' so Slay's been here about two years, huh? Was it before or after he come that they had the first hold-up?"

"Aw, yo're ropin' at the wrong cow, Johnny!" declared

Scotty. "I don't like Harry a-tall, but I'll say he ain't in them hold-ups. Why, every single hold-up exceptin' this last one he's been here in town. I know it, 'cause I thought o' him that way once, an' I took the trouble to find out. Whoever they are, Harry Slay ain't one of 'em. Le's cross over, Johnny. Yo're stayin' at the hotel with me to-night."

CHAPTER VIII

DOROTHY BURR

DOROTHY BURR was lining pie-pans when Johnny Ramsay stuck his head through the kitchen doorway.

"You're a nice one," was her response to his greeting. "Here I waited up half the night expecting you'd come and tell me everything was all right, and you didn't. And I had to hear it all from Mis' Mace this morning. Lot of consideration you have for your friends, I must say."

She stared at him with resentful eyes.

"But, ma'am," he protested, reddening slightly at her naïve announcement, "it was late when we rode in—almost midnight."

"I sat up till one."

"If I'd only knowed! But not knowin', I done what I thought was best. I just brought yore hoss back. He's in the corral now. I'm shore obliged to yuh for lendin' him to me, an' for takin' care o' mine for me. Which that li'l red hoss was shore dead-beat."

"Dead-beat!" She smiled whimsically at the recollection. "I guess he was. The poor chap tried to lie down twice between Main Street and here. He's all right now. He was trying to kick Twinkles when I watered them this morning."

Dorothy pushed back a falling lock of brown hair with a floury hand, and reached for the bowl of filling. She had

a dab of flour on the bridge of her pretty nose, her waist was open at the neck, and her rolled-up sleeves made manifest the dimples in her attractive elbows. She looked a very delectable young person, as she stood there, her smooth, cheeks pink with the heat of the kitchen.

Johnny sat down on the door-sill, braced his toes against the jamb, and built himself the inevitable cigarette. He stared lazily across his humped knees at the lady. He did not find her in the least hard to look at. She was handsomer than she used to be, he told himself. No two ways about it, she certainly filled a fellow's eye.

"What's that?" asked she, raising dark eyes to his.

"I—I didn't say nothin'," denied Johnny, going red to the ears. "She—she's a nice day."

"I beg your pardon. I thought you said something about eyes."

"Who? Me? Nun-no, ma'am."

"All right." Indifferently.

"Come to think of it, maybe now I did say somethin' about eyes," he observed, imbued with sudden daring. "I was just thinkin' how yore eyes are a plumb dark brown, almost black, an' yore eyebrows the same, an' yore hair is a li'l lighter, an' yet they all kind o' match."

She gazed at him with parted lips, the aforesaid almost black eyebrows inquiringly arched. Then she smiled adorably and spooned up some more filling.

"The wonders of nature," she twinkled at him. "Keep your eyes open and you'll learn something new every day. You never used to be so observant."

"My eyesight's gettin' better," was his dry comment.

"I know," she said, leveling the spoon at him, "you've been reading novels. You're getting romantic. You stop it, do you hear? Eyebrows and eyes and hair, indeed!"

She sniffed quite audibly.

"But they look so kind o'—kind o' pretty," he protested. "I was just tellin' yuh. Why, ma'am, even that smear o' flour on yore nose looks nice."

"Never mind about my nose," said she, rubbing the feature in question vigorously with the corner of her apron. "Of course I know I have a certain element of charm, as it were. My perfectly good mirror tells me that. But it isn't at all necessary for you to tell me about it. I don't like it, and I won't have it."

"Won't yuh?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Darn the man! I declare, when it comes to fool questions you're worse than a brat! What you need is a little exercise, and what I need is some fresh water. The pail's in that corner. Do you think you can find the well without being led to it by the hand?"

"I know I can't," he declared promptly. "Besides, yuh need some fresh air. This kitchen's kind o' hot. C'mon out."

"After. Get a move on with that water, and stop your nonsense."

When Johnny had gone, Dorothy sat looking through the open window at the green and distant Government Hills. There was a tender little smile on her lips. At the sound of his returning step she went on with her pie-making.

"Where's yore ma?" he asked, suddenly bethinking himself of Mrs. Burr as he set the full pail in the corner.

"She's over at Mis' Acker's on Jack Creek."

"I thought you said yuh done sent Sammy Barnes for her," said he, recollecting what Dorothy had told the marshal the previous afternoon.

Dorothy giggled.

"I sort of told a fib," she confessed. "I didn't really send for ma. You see, I knew Scotty and some of his boys would be fencing in that quicksand at Wagon Slue on the Dogsoldier yesterday, so I sent Sammy for Scotty instead. But I thought Dan Smith and the rest of that mob had better keep right on believing as long as possible that they had nearly two hours in which to try you and—and—instead of the thirty minutes or so necessary for the ride to Wagon Slue and back."

"I know what yore 'an'—an'' means," said he soberly. "They was shore out to hang me. They'd 'a' done it, if it hadn't been for you."

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed, sliding the pies into the oven and kicking the door shut. "Jim Mace and Soapy were there. I didn't really do anything."

"I'm thinkin' different," he told her earnestly, took a step toward her, and paused, overcome by sudden shyness. "Cuc—call me Johnny, will yuh?"

Dorothy deliberately turned her back on him and crossed the room to the tiny mirror hanging beside the china-closet. Here she busied herself in pulling and patting her coiffure into shape. Head cocked on one side, she surveyed the effect.

Johnny scraped an uncomfortable foot. He thought he had made her angry, and mentally called himself a fool. Yet at the time, his request seemed a natural one to make.

Dorothy turned, still without looking at him, walked to the table, reached for a can of peas and the can-opener, and proceeded to travel round the top of the can. When the peas had been neatly slid into a saucepan and the can thrown out the lady fixed Johnny with a cool and tantalizing eye. The young man was now wishing himself else-

where. But to retire gracefully was beyond his powers. He was perspiring a little. Dorothy smiled the peculiar smile of the entomologist about to impale a rare insect on a large pin.

"How long have you known me?" she inquired coldly.

"Three—three years," stuttered Johnny.

"I think not," she contradicted. "You haven't seen me for at least two years."

"But the year before I seen quite a lot of yuh," defended Johnny.

"Three times," enumerated she with increasing chilliness of demeanour.

"It was more'n that," he insisted.

"It was not. Three times exactly—no more, no less. And I don't believe you said a dozen words to me during any of the three times."

"Oh, ma'am, yo're mistaken!" Johnny's tone was piteously horror-stricken.

Her lips twitched.

"I am not mistaken," she insisted. "I am never mistaken—in anything I may do. Under the circumstances, having known me such a short time and all that, you know, don't you really think it's the least bit nervy to ask permission to call me by my first name?"

"It would be worse if I called yuh that without askin' yuh," said he matter-of-factly.

"Answer my question?" The dark eyes held him.

"Y-yes, ma'am, o' course it would," he affirmed hastily. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—I guess I'll go now."

"Why not wait a moment? I haven't quite finished."

"You've made it more'n plain, ma'am."

Nevertheless Johnny halted on his way to the door.

"Have I, Mister Blind Man? I was just about to say

that I think it would be very nice indeed to call you 'Johnny'. I've been wondering how soon you'd ask me."

"You have! Then what did yuh make all that row for?"

"Just to tease you. You're so easily teased—even for a boy."

"Boy!" he frowned.

"Oh, very well, Mister Methuselah. How's that?"

"Well, I ain't no gran'pa, but I ain't a kid neither. I've been roamin' up an' down this vale o' tears a long, long time."

"My, what a lot you must know!" She stared at him, round-eyed.

"Aw, leave me alone," he begged. "I can't talk like you can, an' yuh know it. Remember, I'm just a young fellah tryin' hard to get along. I may make mistakes now an' later, but outside o' that, my heart beats reg'lar all same alarm-clock."

"I know," she said seriously, "in some ways you're almost human. You may call me Dorothy, if you like."

"Thanks," he observed drily. "I do like Dorothy. Has kind of a smooth sound, ain't it? Yessir, I shore always did like that name Dorothy. 'Spect I'll be usin' it quite a lot from now on."

"Take care you don't strain your throat," she answered solemnly, then promptly dazzled him with a radiant smile. "Reach me down a can of tomatoes from the top shelf, will you—Johnny?"

"All right, Dorothy."

There was more than joy in his grin as he brought her the tomatoes.

"A whole can o' tomatters!" the disapproving voice of Scotty Mackenzie exclaimed from the doorway. "An' a

whole can o' peas! An' a skillet full o' hashed Hogans an' ham! I ain't namin' no names, but they's such a thing as havin' a healthy appetite an' they's such a thing as bein' a hawg. Not meanin' nothin' or nobody in partic'lar, o' course."

"Of course not, old-timer, we understand perfectly," Dorothy assured him. "You're merely shedding sunshine in your own sweet way. Johnny, while you're setting a place for yourself at the table set another for the old gentleman with the whiskers."

"I didn't know I was a-goin' to stay?" Johnny strove to inject the correct degree of surprise into his tone.

"Yuh didn't, huh?" cackled Scotty. "That's a good one, that is. Just as if yuh haven't been sittin' round all mornin' with yore tongue hangin' out an' yore mouth open a-honin' for an invite. Can't fool me. I know."

"Is that so?" snarled Johnny. "An' if I was she's none o' yore business."

"You bet she's my business. First thing I know one o' you young fellers 'll be stealin' my gal away, an' I ain't a-goin' to let nothin' like that happen, not while I have my health, yuh bet yuh. What a fine an' dandy colour yuh got this mornin', Dor'thy. I just noticed it."

The terrible old man smirked shamelessly at the two of them, straddled a chair and sailed his hat into a far corner.

"Yeah, yo're shore as nice-lookin' as a li'l red wagon with that colour an' all," he remarked after a space devoted to the rolling of a cigarette.

"You leave my colour alone," Dorothy told him, forking over the sizzling ham, "or I won't feed you."

"Can't scare me that way," declared Scotty tranquilly. "Yuh know I never eat nothin' here. I don't dast. If I

did, I wouldn't have no appetite for ranch chuck, an' that's whatever."

"I merely wished to be polite," sniffed disdainful Dorothy.

"That's all right. I don't mind. Be as polite as yuh like. Johnny, while Dor'thy is wrastlin' that ham round the pan s'pose you'n me traipse over to the corral. I wanna show yuh somethin' on my saddle."

At that particular moment, a saddle was not Johnny's idea of something to look at. He greatly preferred remaining with Dorothy. He accompanied Scotty in silence.

"Yo're a fine detective," remarked Scotty, as they approached the Burr corral.

"Who said I was?" yapped Johnny.

"Not me," Scotty told him. "I always tell the truth. There, there, crack yore face an' smile. Yuh look so gloomersome yuh hurt my feelin's."

"Damn yore feelin's. What yuh wanna come mussin' round here for makin' fool remarks? She don't like 'em."

"Do you?"

"No, I don't."

"All right, all right, I was just wonderin'. It shore beats all how a well-meanin' gent gets tromped on nowadays. It wasn't like that when I was a kid back East in Macpherson. No sirree, a pore ol' feller like me was respected in them days."

Scotty gurgled out a sob and affected to wipe away a tear.

"Yuh got somethin' to say," accused Johnny. "Y'always have when y'act more like a fool than usual. Spit her out."

"Spit her out!" groaned Scotty. "Such language!

An' my Johnny raised a Christian! Djuh know where you'll go when yuh die, huh? You'll go to hell, that's where yuh'll go. Yessir, yuh'll fry. An' it'll be yore own fault. Gawd knows I've warned yuh till my neck's as dry as a covered bridge."

"Stop it!" commanded Johnny. "What yuh goin' to say?"

"Yuh don't deserve to hear me say it. But me, I'm a forgivin' sport. Yessir, yuh won't find a more forgivin', Gawd-fearin' individual in ten days' ride. Look, darlin', look at this."

Scotty Mackenzie fished something from the staple pocket on his cante and held it toward Johnny. The latter took it wonderingly. "It" had once been a cheap silver watch. Now it was smashed beyond all hope of repair. It lay in Johnny's palm, a battered glassless case, sprouting a tangle of springs and cogwheels.

"Pretty li'l thing," commented Scotty.

"What's it for?" asked the puzzled Johnny.

"It ain't to keep time, but I thought maybe it might come in handy for yuh. I found it this mornin' right at the edge o' that quicksand I'm fencin' in at Wagon Slue."

"Well?"

"Turn her over."

Johnny obeyed. On the back of the case had been rudely scratched the initials "W. H."

"Bill Homan's initials," Scotty said quietly. "She's Bill's watch. I seen him look at her more'n once."

"An' yuh found it right at the edge o' the quicksand?"

"Shore, this mornin'."

"Did any o' yore outfit see it?"

"Nary a one. I was there three minutes ahead of 'em. An' here this thing lay. An' they wasn't a hoofmark or

heelmark within forty feet. I'm tellin' yuh, Johnny, that this timepiece was throwed from across the river some time durin' the night. I know she was throwed 'cause she'd dug into the ground where she landed an' they was the mark o' how she'd rolled a li'l bit after landin'. An' I know she was throwed durin' the night 'cause if she'd been daylight the gent who slung her would never have overthrown an' missed the quicksand—shore. 'Course he was tryin' to sink the watch in the quicksand. What else?"

"I guess yo're right," concurred Johnny. "This watch shore goes to show the road agents live in town or near it."

"Shore does," said Scotty Mackenzie.

CHAPTER IX

THE OTHER WOMAN

JOHNNY spent the afternoon with the hospitable Dorothy. The lady, as she tidily darned her father's socks, did not find Johnny an inspiring companion.

She was neither accustomed to silence nor monosyllabic replies. She did not realize that her visitor was deep in a mathematical problem and making an exceedingly boggy ford of it. One and one will simply not make four no matter how many times you add or multiply them together. But Johnny was a persistent soul. He kept right on juggling Bill Homan's watch and his own suspicions till supper-time arrived and brought not the remotest hint of a satisfactory answer. Whereupon Johnny put on his hat, and departed hotelward—to see a man.

“Yeah, he's a great friend o' mine,” he told Dorothy. “I'd like to stay to supper, honest I would, but I got my own sinful pride, an' moochin' one meal a day off a lady is my limit. G'by.”

Dorothy was left sputtering indignantly.

After supper, and a most indifferent meal it was in comparison with his dinner, he went over to Ragsdale's store and spent a tobacco-laden hour gossiping with Soapy. Jim Mace came in and the hour lengthened to two, and darkness fell, and it was night.

About ten o'clock Johnny stood up on his feet and yawned and stretched his long arms and legs till they cracked.

"I guess I'll kind o' take a look 'round town," he observed.

"Yeah," said Jim Mace, his eye lighting. "Is that a saloon across the street, or do my eyes deceive me?"

"You, Buster!" bawled Ragsdale, "c'min here an' take the store. I gotta go out on a li'l business."

Johnny's chief wish at that moment was to be about his own business. But his two friends did not seek to further that wish. Their earnest desire was to make it a large evening. To which end they hung Johnny and themselves over the bar of the Three Card and invited all and sundry to join them.

Johnny took a small part of one drink, after which, by the exercise of some strategy and all his natural agility, he contrived to escape through a rear window.

Standing well back and to one side of the splayed light from the window, Johnny heard Soapy and Jim call on him by name, and finally leave hurriedly by the front door.

"Let 'em hunt," he grinned. "Me, I got business."

He turned and looked along the irregular line of rear elevations. There was the Golden Rule—those three small glowing windows. Beyond it the houses were dark—private residences. Beyond these again was a dim light—the stage station. The dark bulk adjoining the stage station was, he knew, the rear of the Broken Dollar saloon and gambling-joint. There were six windows and a doorway in the rear wall of the Broken Dollar's back room, but all were dark.

"Slay's shore economical o' light in that back room," was Johnny's idle comment, as he started toward the stage-company's corrals.

Johnny's objective was the Broken Dollar, which palace of chance he intended to surreptitiously approach from

the other end of Main Street in order that his friends might not see him enter. For, should they see him, they would undoubtedly join him for his better protection. And Johnny wished to study his enemy unhampered by any one. That Slay was his most vindictive enemy was certain.

Why? Johnny could not understand why, and he intended to know why. That there was a certain element of risk attached to such close-range observation was true. But Johnny held to the cheerful opinion that hostilities would be riskier for Slay than for himself. As has been stated, Johnny was no marvel on the draw, but he possessed the ability to shoot accurately from the hip and through the bottom of his holster.

Johnny, skirting the rear of the stage company's two corrals, turned the corner of the second enclosure and fell over the projecting tongue of a tiltless freight wagon. He arose, swearing softly and rubbing barked shins. His hat had fallen off. He felt about for it in the darkness, and swore some more. He found it, and straightened just as the six windows in the bark room of the Broken Dollar sprang into dusty radiance and a line of light showed yellowy at the bottom of the door.

"That door always did hang slantways," observed Johnny, and thoughtfully edged behind the freight-wagon.

The door opened. For an instant the form of a woman was silhouetted against the light within, then the door closed behind her.

From the freight wagon to the Broken Dollar was not more than seventy yards. Johnny heard the tink of a kicked tin can. A high heel clicked on a flat stone. A triangular splotch of white, gliding toward the freight wagon, gradually took shape in the darkness. The white

splotch reached the hind wheels, and Johnny heard the pleasant whisper of silk. Noiselessly, Johnny scuttled to the safer shelter of the corral stockade. Body flattened against the posts, he waited.

The white splotch appeared at the fore wheels of the freight-wagon, and bobbed upward as the woman swung herself into the driver's seat.

Followed then the scratch of a drawn match. Johnny stared. The woman was lighting a cigarette. The pulsing flame revealed the face of Slay's sister, Mrs. Lotta Wallace.

At this close range her extreme beauty was more than ever apparent. The black hair growing low in a widow's peak on the forehead, the finely arched eyebrows, the long and curving eyelashes, the straight nose, the wide, full-lipped mouth, and the firm and pointed chin above the round, smooth throat and lovely shoulders, were individually sufficiently striking. In combination with each other the effect was bewildering. Yet Johnny was left cold. He remembered Scotty's leopard and became colder.

The situation was becoming impossible. The spark that was Mrs. Wallace's cigarette was not twenty feet distant. At any moment the lady might climb down, walk along the stockade and discover him. Naturally, she would think he was spying on her, and to be suspected of that by such an unknown quantity as Slay's sister was unthinkable. Why hadn't he kept on going along the stockade when he had the opportunity? Scotty was right. He was a fine detective, making mistakes this way. Johnny sweated clammy and breathed as little as possible.

Suddenly he saw Mrs. Wallace's cigarette describe a

firefly arc in the air and strike the ground in a sputter of sparks. There was no sound of a movement on the driver's seat. Wasn't the woman ever coming down?

A long minute's silence, then a whisper:

"My God, what a life!"

The exclamatory sentence was followed by a pronounced snuffle, then more snuffles, and finally choky little sobs. It was evident that Mrs. Wallace was striving to fight down her emotion. But her grief was too great to be stifled easily.

"I wish I were dead!" she moaned, and began to cry quietly and steadily.

Johnny, hating himself acutely, began to itch between the shoulders. The itch wore itself out after centuries of torture and a cramp fastened sullenly on the muscles of his left foot. Something alive and many-legged fell off the stockade and landed on his shoulder. The something crawled along his shoulder to his neck and tickled his ear.

With infinite caution he raised a nervous hand, removed a night-riding spider and endeavoured to drop the loathsome thing at a distance. With the perversity of vermin it clung whole-heartedly to his finger, and he was forced to slat it off against a post of the stockade, detaching in the process a loose piece of dry bark. The bark fell with a rustle. Johnny caught his breath, and tensed his muscles for a flying start. But the sound of weeping abated not.

Johnny took heart of hope and a long breath. The taking of the latter was injudicious. For many months dust of the corral, stirred into action by the hoofs of the stage-horses, had been sifting and settling behind that loose piece of bark. The fall thereof released an atomic cloud that, at the intake of the long breath, promptly smote the sensitive membrane of Johnny's nostrils.

Johnny gritted his teeth, violently rubbed his nose and otherwise by main strength and a robust will contrived to suffocate the sneeze before it was born. He almost strangled in the effort, and was left with tear-wet eyes and throbbing temples. But he had made not the slightest sound. And Mrs. Wallace wept on forlornly.

Johnny's gambling spirit urged him to take a chance on departure. Between spiders and itchings and incipient sneezes the locality was fast losing its charm. But knowledge of the many tin cans held him back. There was an ancient cast-off stove somewhere about, too. If he should fall over that!

Centuries became eons, and eons became eternity before there was an appreciable lessening of that distressful sobbing on the wagon-seat. Johnny's first-formed estimation of Mrs. Wallace had been gradually altering. By the time her sobs gave way to long-drawn gasping breaths his opinion utterly opposed that of Scotty. He could not understand how she could remind Scotty of a leopard. Why, she was just a little wretched girl crying her heart out, and that was all. Johnny felt quite sorry for her. Which, could he have but known it, is a most dangerous feeling when the lady concerned is as beautiful as was Mrs. Wallace.

There was a deep sigh from the aforesaid lady, and then a rustling and a scraping as she swung down over the double-tree to the ground. White shawl trailing across one shoulder she headed back toward the Broken Dollar. Johnny stretched legs and arms in aching relief and dodged round the pole of the freight-wagon to where he could follow her with his eyes.

He saw her figure become one with the darkness and then reappear with magic-lantern abruptness under one of

the lighted windows of the Broken Dollar. Here she halted, produced from her bosom a small glittering object, held it before her face, and dabbed at her features with an article the size and shape of a small apple.

"Powderin' her face, poor li'l thing," commented Johnny. "I'll bet her eyes are some swole."

The back door of the saloon opened. Slay stood in the doorway.

"Lotta! Lotta!" he called.

"Here I am," she replied, almost at his elbow. "There's no need to yell your head off."

"Didn't see you," he said crossly. "Come in here, quick. What's the matter with you? Why did you leave the wheel?"

"Because I felt like it!" she flung back, smoothing a perfect eyebrow with the ball of her thumb.

"Oh, I see. Suppose you come in then—if you feel like it."

"When I feel like it, I will."

She powdered her nose again with maddening deliberation.

"Come in here at once!" The command lost most of its force because Slay pettishly stamped his foot.

"Of course, you frighten me to death when you do that," she observed sweetly. "Why don't you drag me in by the hair?"

"Are you coming in?"

"I meant to, but since you've been so pleasant, I think I'll go home."

Slay stepped back and slammed shut the door. Mrs. Wallace returned mirror and powder-puff to their hiding-place, blew a kiss at the closed door, and walked slowly round the corner of the building.

"Shore got a mind of her own, that one," remarked Johnny. "Maybe she ain't such a poor li'l thing after all."

Pondering the unexpectedness of woman, Johnny cautiously diagonalled across the open ground to where, beyond the outermost shack, Main Street became a trail. Here he turned townward and, walking leisurely, came to the Broken Dollar, pushed open the door, and entered.

The long wide barroom was filled with tobacco-smoke and customers. The tobacco-smoke hung in layers in the atmosphere. The customers hung in suspense upon the turn of the cards and the caprice of a tiny ball dancing within a sunken wheel of many pockets.

Johnny did not pause at the door. He walked without haste between the tables to the bar at the other end of the room. There were only three men standing at the bar. One was the hard-faced Tom Keen, he of the two guns, Ganey of the dyed mustache, and a sharp-featured citizen known as Spill Harper. These three turned and surveyed him as he approached. Johnny gave them stare for stare, fronted up to the bar, rang down a quarter and called for whiskey. The bartender shoved forward a bottle and a glass. Johnny poured out a scant two fingers, cupped his left hand round the glass, and leaned sidewise against the bar.

His attitude was lazy and his demeanour careless, but his half-shut sardonic eyes missed no detail of what was passing under the hanging lamps in that big room. He perceived that fully half the men in the place were neglecting their play to watch him. Some of them nudged each other and whispered among themselves, but when his eyes fell upon these they ceased nudging and whispering and affected an air of extreme unconcern.

As Johnny's gaze fell upon the roulette table he smiled

slightly. He understood Slay's anger at Mrs. Wallace's defection. Harry Slay was behind the table now, and the patronage was slim. With his sister to spin the wheel roulette would have been the most popular game in the room.

The gambler's face as he dropped the ball and worked the lever was wooden. He paid and took in bets without once lifting his eyes above the level of the table. Abruptly he turned to a friend.

"Spin her, will you, Bill?" he asked. "I have a little matter of business to arrange."

"Shore," replied friend Bill, and Slay stepped out from behind the table and walked straight toward Johnny Ramsay standing at the door.

Johnny had not been expecting any such sudden move as this, but he was in readiness. The heel of his right hand just touched the butt of his gun. Slay's hands were swinging at his sides, but this meant nothing. Johnny had seen Slay throw down once before.

As Slay approached Johnny the room, following the hasty shuffling of folk intent on leaving the zone of fire, became as still as midnight in a church. Johnny wondered where Slay's bullet would make its little hole. He himself intended to put as many pieces of lead as he could into Slay's abdomen. Johnny had killed three men since his entry into the cattle business. But he had killed them in an impersonal way, that is, at long range, with a rifle. He had borne no special animosity against these men. He had shot them simply as a matter of course. They had been rustlers, outlaws of the range, wolves to be destroyed on sight. And he had not seen them die.

But here was a man he must shoot at close range with a six-shooter. How would it feel to perforate an enemy and

watch him pass out under one's very eyes? It suddenly struck him that he himself would in all likelihood be too dead to observe with any thoroughness the demise of another. The idea tickled his sense of humour, and he chuckled audibly.

Not ten feet away Slay halted, his hands held well away from his sides.

"Looking for me?" Slay asked, his pale slanting eyes meeting Johnny's fixed gray stare.

"I never hunt trouble," replied Johnny.

"Any hard feelings?"

"Never use 'em."

"Have a drink?"

"Shore."

The bartender made ludicrous haste to serve the boss and Johnny. Eye to eye the two men drank off their liquor. Johnny, as etiquette required, called for another round. They drank again. Then Slay nodded to Johnny, mentioned that he would see him later, and went back to his roulette table. The incident was closed, and the spectators resumed their pursuit of pleasure with noisy avidity.

Johnny, standing alone at the bar—Tom Keen, Ganey, and Spill Harper had gone elsewhere—sought to probe the true inwardness of the gambler's motive in seeking peace.

"Trying to make me believe he's willin' to be friendly," he reflected. "But he shore is a bigger man than I took him to be, comin' right out an' facin' it thisaway. Nerve an' slickness—he's got 'em both. An' yet not ten minutes ago he stamped his foot at his sister, which is shore one kid's trick."

CHAPTER X

THE LIGHT THAT LIES

THE following afternoon Johnny, ensconced on the Burr doorsill, saw Slay and his sister coming up the street. Slay, frock-coated in spite of the heat, was leading a saddled horse, and Mrs. Wallace, radiant in gray and old rose, held a parasol between her complexion and the sun. She was talking animatedly to her brother.

"Here come some friends o' yores," Johnny announced, tapping the back of the chair on which Dorothy sat darning religiously.

"Who's with Harry?" she asked calmly.

"Yuh knowed he was comin'!" he accused.

"Why, of course," she told him with a quick sidewise glance. "We're going riding to-day."

"So that's why yuh've got yore boots on." Johnny was not in the least pleased, and his tone showed it.

"My dear man, what would you have me wear?"

"I don't mean yore boots. I mean yuh might 'a' told me."

"What?" she teased.

Johnny glared his displeasure at her levity. Dorothy smiled.

"What does it matter about me?" inquired Johnny bitterly. "I was only spendin' the afternoon. I'd like to know why yuh couldn't 'a' gone ridin' with me, Dorothy?"

"'You never asked me, sir, she said.' There, there,

Johnny, you'll ruin your perfectly good features if you persist in frowning that way. Who's with Harry?"

"His sister." Glumly.

"She is!" Dorothy's dark eyes sparkled.

She bit off a thread with a vicious click of white teeth. The colour in her cheeks deepened. Johnny was totally oblivious to these manifestations of feminine interest. He was too busy feeling abused.

The Slay tribe arrived. The gambler and Johnny were gravely restrained in their greeting. Not so the ladies. They kissed each other with great fervour and "My dear" before and after, and bestowed compliments with a buttery lavishness.

The gambler introduced Johnny to Mrs. Wallace, and asked Dorothy if she was ready.

"Right away," she told him, reaching inside the doorway for her quirt. "Be with you in three shakes. You go on and saddle up."

Slay lifted his hat to his sister and Johnny and departed for the corral. Dorothy followed a moment later, after strictly enjoining Mrs. Wallace and Johnny to make themselves at home till she returned. Johnny trailed Dorothy with sulky eyes. He hated Slay. What right had the man to take Dorothy riding?

"Won't you?" Mrs. Wallace was saying.

"Won't I what?" He stared at her without friendliness.

"Won't you talk to me? I've already asked you three times."

She had closed her parasol and now stood with her hands clasped over the round handle. There was a talented patch of court-plaster on her left cheek-bone. Her lips were slightly parted and her eyes were warmly pleading. She was very lovely, and she wanted him to talk to her.

What small hands she had. The prospect of a long afternoon, full of empty hours and shimmering heat, decided Johnny.

"Ma'am, I'd shore admire to talk to yuh," he declared solemnly.

"It's dear of you to say that," she said. "I know you don't mean it, but I really would like to make up to you for Dorothy's absence if—if I could and you'd let me."

This was spreading the jam rather thickly, but man is an obtuse animal. Johnny grinned.

"I guess now you an' I'd oughta get along together real well," was his hearty endorsement.

Mrs. Wallace smiled, and a fugitive dimple showed for an instant in her right cheek.

"Suppose we go over to my house," she suggested. "It's near the river, and there's almost always *some* breeze."

"That shore listens well," said Johnny. "Let's go."

They went. Half Main Street saw them go, and the whole town knew it ten minutes later.

"Just watch her grin at him!" urged Mrs. Mace, flattening a snubby nose against a window-pane in her kitchen.

"That's the first time I ever seen her out walkin' with a man," declared Mrs. Ragsdale. "Move over, dear. I can't see a thing. She's wearin' the gray again, ain't she? Makes her look hump-shouldered, don't it?"

"Shore does, an' that rose colour ain't fit for a sallow thing like her to wear. She hasn't colour enough. Look! Look! See her walk close to him. The brazen creature!"

"I always knew she was a hussy for all her quiet ways. The cat!"

"Oh, she's a sly minx. They're the ones, Ella. The

putty-faced things who act as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, they're the ones to look out for."

"She's skinny as a rail," contributed Mrs. Ragsdale, holding resolutely to the main road. "I'll bet her legs ain't thicker'n matches."

"Whose legs ain't thicker'n matches?" asked Jim Mace, entering at the moment.

"None of your business," his wife told him. "Didja see that widow woman an' Johnny Ramsay?"

"Yuh bet yuh. Johnny always was a lucky jigger."

"Oh, is that so? Well, if you think so, Jim Mace, I'll just thank you to keep such opinions to yoreself, an' don't you forget it neither! C'mon, Ella, let's go in the side room. I believe she's takin' him home, an' if they sit on the porch we can watch 'em fine."

But Mrs. Wallace and Johnny did not sit on the porch. The fascinating widow knew all about a small town, and she took her guest into the house. The puncher's eyes widened at sight of the sitting-room and its appointments. There were several water-colours and three small paintings on the walls. Above the door the mounted head of a buffalo bull faced a splendid Sioux warbonnet hanging on the opposite wall. Chairs, broad and deep, a wide table, a long sofa covered with fat pillows, a book-case full of books, and a thick, soft carpet, completed the picture. Even the sitting-room at the Bar S was not so fine as this one. Johnny moved cautiously. Spurs are scratchy things.

Mrs. Wallace excused herself and vanished through a doorway hung with a pair of striped Zuni blankets. Johnny slid across the carpet to the nearest chair. He sat, having care to his spurs, and absentmindedly pulled out the makings. He remembered his manners as he was on the point

of striking a match and disgustedly shot the white roll out of the window. He began to wish he hadn't come. It was no fun sitting alone this way. Where was Mrs. Wallace anyway?

At that moment she pushed aside the Zuni blankets and came toward him, smiling delightfully. She was carrying a small tray. There were two tall glasses and a square bottle on that tray. Times immediately began to improve. Johnny's somber eye brightened.

"You may not like this," she said, holding out the tray. "It's something I invented myself. I call it Texas Pete."

Texas Pete was of a light brown colour and both glasses were full of him. Johnny's fingers wrapped themselves round one of the glasses. Mrs. Wallace took the other, set the tray on the table, and sat down on the sofa. She tucked one leg under her, and swung the other child-fashion. Raising the glass to her lips, she looked at Johnny across the rim and sipped slowly.

Johnny did not sip slowly. He was not accustomed to drinking that way. He lowered the half-emptied glass to the arm of the chair and grinned cheerfully.

"Reg'lar shore-'nough drink," he assured her. "What's in it?"

She told him. He stared aghast at the tale of ingredients, and looked down at his glass with sudden respect.

"One more o' this here Texas gent an' I'd shore push the bridge over," said he. "No, ma'am, no more. I'll just finish this an' call it a day."

"You're not going yet!" she exclaimed piteously. "Oh, you mustn't! I'll be so lonely if you do."

Once more the jam and the trowel. Such flattery would have held Johnny even if he had intended going, which he hadn't.

"I wasn't thinkin' o' goin'," he told her with an ease born of Texas Pete and the lady's blandishments. "Can I smoke?"

"Surely. Try one of mine."

He did, and she taught him how two cigarettes may be simultaneously lit by the one match. Besides being economical this method of starting a smoke has a charm all its own. Of course it necessitated Johnny's moving to the sofa. He did not return to the chair. With every passing minute he was feeling more at home. He almost forgot that the lady's brother was his enemy. He watched her leaning back among the puffy cushions. Her eyes were deep as wells. Then it suddenly struck him that for the last hour he had been doing most of the talking. She had asked questions, apparently casual questions, but they required lengthy answers.

"Well," he said, with a slight laugh, "I'm shore warmed up to-day. Bet I've talked an arm off yuh."

"Don't stop," she begged, in her earnestness leaning forward and clasping her hands round her silken knee. "I'm enjoying it so. I just love to hear how men do things."

"Do yuh?"

"Of course. Tell me some more about those Indians. Did they keep right on stealing horses?"

"Nobody keeps right on stealin' hosses, ma'am. He steals one hoss too many an' gets stretched. An' them Injuns did an' they was."

"I suppose it always turns out that way," said she softly.

"Yes'm, an' it's always that one hoss too many does it," he moralized. "If a gent would only be satisfied. But 'No,' he says, 'when it comes to stealin' hosses I'm the original Solomon forty ways from the Jack,' an' out he

prances, foolish an' certain, an' gloms onto that extra cayuse. It's the same in everythin' else thataway, ma'am—killin', hold-ups, an' all. They ain't no difference."

"And yet nothing seems to stop the road agents in this county." She was looking up into his face with brilliant eyes.

"No," he admitted, "they seem to be playin' in right good luck. But you wait. Maybe yuh'll have to wait a year or two, maybe longer, but you wait. They'll be got, ma'am."

"I'm sure I hope so," she declared, leaning back and patting her hair with long, slim fingers. "I had some silk for a gown coming all the way from Chicago, and the stage was stopped that trip, and it was raining, and they ripped open the package and left it there in the mud. I could have wept when the agent told me. My pretty yellow silk ruined! I hope they do catch them."

"That's shore too bad about yore dress," he sympathized. "Likely them bandits didn't know what it was, or they wouldn't 'a' touched it."

He was watching a tiny pulse on the side of her round throat. He hadn't noticed it before. The little telltale was throbbing steadily and fast. Yet the colour in her cheeks had not altered a shade. It was her own colour, too. He had made sure of that at the cigarette-lighting.

"I wish you were the sheriff or a deputy or something," said she.

"Me? Why?"

"Because I believe you could catch them. I believe you could do more than this idiotic sheriff."

"He's doin' his best, ma'am. Ain't yuh takin' the loss o' that dress mighty hard?"

"Oh, it isn't the dress. It's the idea of these bandits

being able to do what they please. They make a perfect joke of the sheriff and his men. Oh, if I were a man, I'd get out and do something! I'd give these road agents a run for their money. You said yourself there's always one horse too many. I'd make the Fane job that one horse. There are two thousand dollars apiece offered for those bandits. Did you know that?"

"I'd heard." He nodded a grave head.

"It would certainly be worth almost any man's while. I should think you'd try it out." The brilliant eyes had narrowed ever so slightly, and the little pulse was beating quite rapidly now.

"I ain't a fool," he said seriously. "I never hunt trouble, not never. An' two thousand dollars ain't enough for me to bet my life against nohow. S'pose, now, I lose the life. What good's two thousand wheels to me? No sirree, you hear me talkin', if anybody wants to hunt road agents, let 'em. I wouldn't think o' spoilin' their fun. I got me a good job at the Flyin' M, an' I aim to keep it, yuh bet yuh."

"What are you doing in town then?"

"Oh, I ain't exactly started in yet," the answer came pat. "Yuh see, I figure to spend all my money first. Maybe by the first o' next week I'll go to huntin' Scotty's strays."

"Scotty Mackenzie must be an easy-going employer to let you begin work with a vacation."

"Men are scarce."—This was true—"I told him I wouldn't ride for him unless I could have these few days off. Shucks, I don't draw wages till I start, so what's the difference to Scotty? Scotty said he wished I was twins."

"Twins?"

"Shore, so's he could hire the other. He wants another man. They's a whole heap o' country to cover—more'n

one stray man can swing. I tell yuh what, ma'am, yuh *ride* when the Flyin' M hires yuh."

Was the little pulse beating less strongly now? He thought it was. Mrs. Wallace turned her eyes away and inspected the pink tips of her pretty fingers.

"Do you know," she remarked suddenly, "I like you."

"That's—that's fine," said he lamely, for he was somewhat taken aback.

"Yes," she continued, "you tell funny stories, and you aren't fresh. I—I like it. There's not much for a woman to do in this town. Of course, I'm busy here in the mornings, and the Broken Dollar fills in the evenings, but the afternoons are awfully long when there's no one to play with. I'm pretty lonely sometimes."

"That's shore a fright, ma'am." He did not know what else to say.

"Will you come to see me sometimes?" She gave him another of her straight looks.

"I'd admire to," he declared, and meant it, too.

And in a little while he said good-bye and walked away up Main Street.

"Is she, or ain't she?" he asked himself. "I shore dunno. One thing, she's a shore-'nough lady, even if she did show me that new way o' lightin' a cigarette. An' she likes me 'cause I don't get fresh, huh? I'd like to see myself. Bet she'd smack my face good if I did."

He turned in at Ragsdale's. The storekeeper was alone in the place and greeted him with a portentous wink.

"I ain't got no sofys nor goose-hair pillers nor stuffed-up chairs to offer yuh," Soapy observed, "but yuh can sit on the counter if yo're a good boy."

Johnny stared coolly at the storekeeper.

"Yuh seem to know a lot," he drawled.

Ragsdale put his head on one side and looked Johnny up and down. Then he scratched his ear.

"Nobody ever called you good-lookin', did they, Johnny?" asked Soapy anxiously.

"Whatnell——" Johnny began indignantly.

"Well, I was wonderin'," explained his friend. "Yuh know, Johnny, my eyes are good. I can always see where I'm lookin', an' I never seen nothin' beautiful about yuh, exceptin' the way yuh handle a rifle. But she ain't seen yuh handle a rifle."

He paused in evident perplexity and scratched the other ear.

"It's that butter yuh don't sell," remarked Johnny. "She's gone to yore head. I don't wonder neither. The smell's thick enough to cut. Why don't yuh open another window?"

"It ain't the butter," denied Soapy. "It's yore looks, an' you ain't got none, so that ain't possible. She's magic, that's what she is, magic. No offence meant, an' I know it ain't none o' my business, but I'm a married man an' maybe I can use the information. Howdja do it? Be a good feller an' tell."

"How'd I do what?"

"Howdja get to go see Mis' Wallace?"

"What's unusual in that?"

"Nothin', only yore the first gent ever went to her home to see her. An' walkin' up with her, too. That's why I say it's magic."

"Don't nobody ever go see her?"

"Plenty would like to, but she won't have 'em. Not that she's standoffish. No sirree, it's 'Good-mornin'' with her an' 'H're yuh, ma'am?' an' she smiles an' bows pleasant as yuh please an' twice as pretty. An' that's all.

She'll take yore money or pay bets at the wheel with a word for all the boys. But it's always 'Not to-night, I'm sorry,' or 'Some other time,' when a gent only wants to walk home with her. An' she does it all without hurtin' a feller's feelin's. So this here is yore lucky day, Johnny. I'll bet if you was to go down to the Broken Dollar yuh'd break the bank."

The only man she had ever allowed to call. And she had asked him to call again. What was her purpose? There was one. She was not the woman to break her custom for a mere whim. Johnny wore his best poker face, but his eye was sardonic.

"For a storekeeper, Soapy, yo're one wise Abraham," said Johnny Ramsay, and changed the subject with a request for rifle cartridges, caliber forty sixty-five.

But Soapy Ragsdale did not stock the odd calibers. Johnny departed for the Golden Rule. Again he was out of luck. Forty sixty-fives were apparently a dead card in Paradise Bend. Johnny reflected that there were other towns and other stores and took heart of hope.

That evening Johnny went to see Dorothy Burr. Her greeting was casual—elaborately so. There was a five-pound box of candy on the table.

"Have some," invited Dorothy.

Johnny thought he wouldn't eat any candy, thank you just the same. A tooth had been troubling him. He feared to excite the little brute. Dorothy smiled oddly.

"You weren't here when I got back," she remarked, the smile becoming a trifle fixed.

"Why, no, I wasn't," confessed Johnny. "I was somewhere else."

"Isn't Lotta a dear?" The tone was ingenuous, but the smile was now quite fixed.

"Mis' Wallace? Shore, she's all that. Just as folksy as yuh please. Nothin' stuck-up about her."

"I heard she took you home with her."

"I guess she thought I was lonesome."

"All the same, it was rather a conspicuous thing to do, I think. She never has any one to call."

"So I heard." Dryly.

Dorothy stared at Johnny open-mouthed.

"Well," she burst out, "of all the smug, conceited men you're the smuggest and conceitedest!"

Then she laughed. But the laughter did not ring true.

CHAPTER XI

VERY STRAY MEN

HE SHORE wanted me stretched—bad,” conceded Johnny.

“W’at you t’ink—dees Slay she was one of dem bush’wackair?” inquired Laguerre, his hard black eyes glittering.

“He wasn’t one of ’em,” Johnny said decidedly.

“How you know?”

The half-breed was now wholly the Indian. One saw back of those hard eyes the long line of relentless hunters of men.

“In the first place the hosses they rode was two chest-nuts an’ a blacktail dun. His hoss was a big black. He’s got several—two grays an’ a red-an’-white pinto, too.”

“Huh,” grunted Laguerre. “I weel look at de face of dees man. I have de feelin’—but I weel firs’ look at hees face, me. How far now to de plass w’ere dey keel Ol’ Man Fane un Beel Homan?”

“About two mile.”

“Lemme see dat watch, Johnnee.”

Johnny handed his friend the shattered watch that had once been Homan’s.

“Dees ees deir firs’ meestak,” observed Laguerre. “Bimeby dey mak anudder un anudder, un den we catch dem, by gar. De meestak, de meestak, alway de meestak.

I have been de scout, I have leeve wit' Enjun, un I know, me."

So, holding converse on the ways of malefactors, red and white, they came to the scene of the murders and their attendant robbery. Three parts eaten by wolves, an offence to eye and nostril, Fane's dead horse lay by the side of the road. Breathing through their mouths, the two men forced their mounts up the side of the spur to the pocket among the pines where the road-agents had tied their horses.

The sign was more than seventy-two hours old, and it had been partly obliterated by the feet of Scotty and the investigating committee, yet Laguerre looked quite pleased.

"Dey tie two pony to dat pine," said he. "She ees de same pine un dem cayuse nevair move. One of dem stand on tree leg un point de off toe. See how deep ees de mark o' dat toe. She was stand dere long tam un was not move, dat cayuse. Dere was not de skeetair to mak dem move mabbeso. Dey was de pony wit' de good nature lak de lamb. Dey was tie wit' de rein. Dey was not even gnaw de bark. But look dere. Look w'ere de odder hoss was tie. She was move roun' de tree—geet all tangle' up. She was switch de tail—see dem hair on de quakin' asp. Un dem hair ees black. She was de dun hoss. She bite de bark. She pull back on de rope. How I know dat? Well, den, I have de eye, me, un I see w'ere leetle t'read o' de rope ees steeck een de bark. Dey ees steeck een hard, un dat ees how I know de hoss pull back. Dat dun was kick, too. See de mark o' hees shoe on dat pine. Here w'ere hees fore feet stan'. Long way 'tween dem two mark. She was de long-leg hoss, dat dun cayuse. Shore I know you could not see all dat w'en dey was cross de creek. Dey was ride fas' un de watair was fly 'roun'.

But I know, *bien sûr*. Un all t'ree pony was shod. Gimme de match, my frien'. No hurry goin' to de Ben' now. I wan't for geet dere aftair de sun have set."

"We've got somethin' to go on," remarked Johnny, when both cigarettes were burning well.

"We have got one 'ole lot for go on," softly corrected Laguerre. "We know dat one dese men use de forty-seexty-five Winchestair, two pony ees de good-nature' ches'nut un one ees de long-leg blacktail dun w'at enjoy for bite de tree un keeck un pull back un have for be tie wit' de rope. Dat blacktail dun, I tell you, my frien', she ees anudder meestak. Dere can not be many pony lak dees hoss. No, dere can not. You will see."

Laguerre inhaled complacently. He stretched his arms lazily and blew smoke through his nostrils and smiled a slow smile and licked his lips cat-fashion.

Johnny had given his friend a circumstantial account of events at the Bend. Which account, it must be said, lacked completeness in that Johnny neglected to mention Mrs. Lotta Wallace, her actions, and his call upon her. Somehow he did not feel it was necessary. Why drag her in?

At dusk Johnny and Laguerre separated, the latter to ride the trail in to the Bend, the former to cross the Yellow Medicine, and, ever keeping that stream on his left hand, skirt the sprawling length of Crow Mountain, strike the Flying M trail at Wagon Slue, and arrive in town from the north.

Between eleven and twelve Johnny dismounted at the hitching-rail of the Three Card. He was to meet Laguerre at the Three Card. But the half-breed was not in the saloon, nor was he at the Jacks Up, nor at Soapy Ragsdale's. Buster was in charge of the store, but he didn't know

where pop was. Guessed he must be round some'ers. Johnny guessed so too and, on his way to the Broken Dollar, looked in at the Golden Rule. Cal Mason was there buying tobacco, and Dan Smith, the marshal, was picking out a shirt, a beautiful thing of savage orange, thickly besprinkled with a chaste design of purple horse-shoes.

Cal Mason greeted Johnny with a grave "H'are yuh?" behind which lurked the smile of friendship, but Dan Smith did not go beyond a stiff nod. Johnny, his sardonic eye fixed on the marshal's ultrabillious choice, leaned against the counter.

"Now, that's what I call a shirt," he observed cheerfully.

"I dunno as yuh got any license to call it anythin'," said the liverish Dan Smith.

"I was just admirin' it, Marshal," insisted Johnny. "No offence, but yuh'll shore be right up in style. Back East they sell shirts like this here so fast that the factories all have to work overtime. Yessir, shore do. An' why, 'cause all the laundrymen buy 'em. No soap-wrastlin' Chink o' the lot thinks he can go out walkin' Sunday afternoons less'n he's inside one o' these shirts. Funny, ain't it?"

Johnny's eyes were no longer sardonic. They were calm and sweetly innocent as they gazed into the face of the marshal. The latter, very angry, could have slain him willingly. But there are times when to take offence means to make oneself ridiculous. Dan Smith did not wish to appear ridiculous. He compromised by according Johnny no further attention and taking the shirt.

Johnny, allowing him thirty seconds' handicap, followed. He was in time to see the marshal pause a hundred feet

away, swing his arm, and hurl something in between two houses. After which the marshal went into the Jacks Up Saloon.

Johnny hurried to where the marshal had stood and dived into the space between the two houses. Groping purposefully in the darkness, his fingers encountered a paper-wrapped parcel. He swept it up and returned to the street. In the light from an open window he tore off a corner of the wrapping. A vivid purple horseshoe backed by savage orange stared him out of countenance.

The marshal, drinking with friends at the Jacks Up bar, felt a touch on his shoulder. He turned to behold the too-familiar features of Johnny Ramsay. The puncher laid a parcel on the bar, a parcel from whose torn wrapper protruded the tail of Dan Smith's recent purchase.

"Yore shirt," Johnny announced distinctly. "Yuh dropped it—in the street."

The pause between the two halves of the explanatory sentence was obvious. The marshal knew that he was being maliciously badgered, and he knew that Johnny knew that he knew. But again this was one of those times. Besides, Cal Mason, expectantly solemn, was watching from the doorway. The marshal mumbled his thanks, tucked in the dangling shirt-tail, and stuck the package under his arm. Johnny went out into the street. There the delighted Cal Mason fell into step at his side.

"Yore style suits me," averred Cal. "Let's licker."

So they crossed the street to the Three Card and said "How" twice. After which ceremony Johnny drifted down to the Broken Dollar and Cal went home to tell his wife how Scotty Mackenzie's stray man had run a blazer on Dan Smith.

At the Broken Dollar Johnny found Laguerre playing

poker with the express-agent, hard-faced Tom Keen, and one of Slay's dealers. Johnny smiled inwardly. For the half-breed was skilful at cards, and his skill was costing the others much money. All the blue chips on the table were in front of Laguerre, and a blue chip in the Broken Dollar was standard at ten dollars.

Johnny, on his way to the bar, passed the roulette table. Mrs. Wallace was behind the wheel and business was very brisk. Leaning against the wall at her back stood her brother. His hands were in his trouser-pockets and a long black cigar was clamped between his jaws. He glanced at Johnny with twinkling, merry eyes and nodded. Mrs. Wallace did not see the puncher. She was busy raking in several bets.

While Johnny was still eyeing his first drink, in marched, to his intense disgust, Racey Dawson. Racey was not due for two days, and here he was on the heels of Telescope. Johnny yearned to tell Racey what he thought of him.

As Racey came through the doorway he slapped his sides with a full sweep of both arms. Dust flew from his clothing in a gray cloud. His face was ashen with it. Grinning widely, he crossed the floor straight to where Johnny stood at the bar, and Johnny saw that there was dust inside his ears and down his neck.

"Thought you'd get away from me, huh?" cried Racey, teetering on his heels in front of Johnny. "Tried to give me the slip, huh? Just because I had a li'l business over on the Two Deer an' was maybe now a day late, yuh run off an' left me."

Racey in his teetering apparently lost his balance and fell forward against the dismayed Johnny, who foresaw the crumbling of his plans under Racey's blundering. But Racey's hand, flung out to save himself, gripped Johnny's

arm, and Johnny felt that member squeezed three times before Racey regained his equilibrium.

"Aw, yuh'd oughta come sooner," Johnny said instantly. "Djuh think I got nothin' to do but wait for yuh while yo're hellin' round all over the country?"

Their voices were not pitched low, but Laguerre, facing them at his table across the room, gave no sign that he heard.

"Well, yuh might 'a' waited," grumbled Racey. "Le's irrigate."

While they stood in silence, the bottle between them, a man slouched in from the street and halted inside the doorway. He was a stocky citizen with a sandy mustache and an aggressive chin. He pushed back his hat and one perceived that his head was curiously pinched-in at the temples. This characteristic, combined as it was with total absence of eyebrows and a wall-eye, did not make for attractiveness. The stocky man surveyed the roomful with a cold and fishy stare. His oblique gaze passed over Johnny and Racey and fixed itself on a corner of the bar. Still looking at the corner of the bar, Wall-eye swaggered bow-leggedly up to Racey Dawson and suggested drinks. He likewise smiled amiably, revealing the lack of two upper front teeth.

"This here's my friend, Johnny Ramsay," said Racey, flicking a tactful thumb at Johnny. "What might I call you?"

"Now I shore did forget to tell yuh my name, didn't I?" smiled the stranger, his crooked eye missing Racey by four feet. "Which she's Bale Harper. Barkeep, got a lame arm? I'm waitin' for a glass."

The bartender hastily slid a bottle and a glass across the bar. As the newcomer tilted the bottle Johnny noticed

that the third finger of his right hand was cut off at the second joint. Bale Harper downed his liquor at a gulp and instantly poured out another glassful. Two or three fingers were not for Harper. He filled his glass a-brim and slopping over.

"Nothin' like good measure," said he with a leer, and added with emphasis, "that's somethin' I always aim to get."

Johnny made no comment. He did not like this Bale Harper.

"Got a brother round here some'ers," remarked Mr. Harper, with his gap-toothed grin. "Been lookin' for him ever since I drifted into town. You ain't seen him, have yuh, Mister Ramsay—feller about my size he is, sandy hair an' face likewise, called Spill?"

"Ain't seen him to-day," answered the puncher, shaking an indifferent head. "Yesterday he was around. Him an' Tom Keen was together. There's Tom over there. Maybe he'll know."

But Johnny's hint did not bear fruit. Bale Harper frowned in the general direction of Tom Keen and said he guessed he'd wait and see Spill later.

"Good whiskey," he declared, and had another.

"I'm tired," announced Racey. "Guess now I'll give an imitation of a young feller rollin' in. How about the hotel, Johnny—got a bed?"

"Shore. C'mon."

They departed, despite strong urging to the contrary by Bale Harper. But they did not go to the hotel. For privacy in conversation was impossible in that hostelry. The partitions were too thin and there were many cracks. Hence it was that Johnny and his friend, walking without haste, slid silently between Soapy Ragsdale's house and

his corral and felt their cautious way in among Soapy Ragsdale's neatly corded stacks of winter firewood.

"What's up?" demanded Johnny, when they were squatting on their heels between two stacks.

"All hell," was Racey's answer. "Lute Holloway's downed and Slim Berdan's shot through both legs an' his shoulder."

"Is that why yuh——"

"You wait. Lemme tell it my own way, will yuh?"

"Shore, but yore way is such a funny way, Racey. Y' always travel ten mile to go two."

"Aw, shut up, I'm travelin' straight now. An' speakin' o' travelin'! Say, if you'd done the ridin' I been doin' these last three days you'd cash, yuh hear me talkin'. My hoss is wore down to a whisper an' I don't feel like much more'n a short stutter myself. Say——"

"There yuh go, a whirlin' that wide loop! I'm shore sorry to hear yo're tired. I'd cry for yuh if I could. But I don't see why yuh didn't wait till it was time to start like we planned. The stage would 'a' brought the news about Holloway an' Slim."

"Gimme a chance, gimme a chance! My Gawd, yuh want the whole thing all at once! You lemme alone—Who's talkin' loud? I ain't. Yo're doin' the bellerin'. Well, Telescope he sifted out o' town four days ago in the mornin. I stayed. That night Bill Lainey an' me are in the Blue Pigeon about one o'clock listenin' to Mike Flynn gas about them South Sea Islands o' his, when *Bangety-Bang!* goes a rifle down street a ways. *Bangety-Bang!* goes another, then a couple more mixes in, an' they's a whole hatful o' noise. The South Sea Islands stopped immediate, an' we sits down on the floor where the counter's thickest. An' a good thing we did. A forty

sixty-five comes in a window, grooves the counter over my head, busts a can o' peaches on the opposite shelf an' sticks in the wall. An'——"

"A forty sixty-five, yuh say?"

"Shore, a forty sixty-five. Lemme tell it, lemme tell it—huh? Of course I know. Mike he dug the lead out of the wood later an' he told me. Well, that one bullet was all that come our way. They's only a few shots, not more'n thirty at the outside, then *tuckety-tuck, tuckety-tuck* up the street come four jiggers a-ridin' an' a-quirtin' an a-spurrin' like they hadn't a minute to live. They wasn't out o' town before they's a pile o' hollerin' down in front o' Slim Berdan's house. The three of us goes down, an' they's the two Holland boys carryin' Slim Berdan, bleedin' like a stuck steer, into his house. Across the sidewalk Lute Holloway's lyin' on his face. They's five holes in Lute an' one o' them holes is in his heart."

"As good a deputy as they ever was in Fort Creek County, Lute was," put in Johnny.

"Shore. Jake Rule was worse'n wild. Well, what with Lute downed an' Slim shot up, they's all kinds o' friskin' round, but we got started in maybe fifteen minutes—Jake Rule, Kyle, his other deputy, yores truly, Two Spot Riley, Piney Jackson, maybe they's twenty-five of us—an' we punched the breeze. We knowed they'd headed north on the Bend trail an' that's all we did know."

"Didn't nobody see 'em close?"

"Slim did, but she was too dark to see much. They was all on their hosses anyhow."

"What did they try to do—rob the express office?"

"They did not. They come in to get Slim. An' Holloway, because he lived with Slim, got into the muss."

"Howdja know?"

"Why, they all four come a-gallop in' up to Slim's house, an' one of 'em rides up on the sidewalk an' hammers on Slim's door, an' yells for Slim to come out quick, he's wanted. Slim he says he thought right away they was a fraycas in town, so him an' Holloway jumps out o' bed an' runs for the door. Lute reaches the door first an' runs out. They got him instanter before he could even pull. Slim had time to pull all right an' flip the hammer twice before they shot the gun out of his hand and throwed three bullets into him in other places."

"Then what?"

"We rode after them killers like I said, an' it's night an' all an' we over-rode their tracks. So we had to work back an' when it come daylight we found where they'd left the trail just south o' Bear Mountain an' headed northwest. That settled it for Jake Rule. Northwest meant them killers couldn't be bound nowhere else but the Emigrant Hills on the Dogsoldier. So we spraddled right along, losin' the trail an' findin' her again, an' bimeby we lost her good an' proper like I knowed we would in a creek.

"Shore, they rode the water like ducks, an' we never did pick up the trail again. But that didn't bother Jake Rule. 'The Emigrant Hills, boys,' says Jake. 'We'll catch 'em there.' We stopped at the Anvil ranch for fresh horses, but no news. Nobody stopped there in two weeks, an' they hadn't missed a single cayuse."

"The B bar B's west o' the Anvil an' Hall's is east," suggested Johnny.

"Shore, but we didn't have time to go there. We went on an' we hit the Emigrants an' never seen a measly hoof-mark anywhere. We met Burns, the Wagon Wheel stray man, an' he hadn't seen nobody. I knowed they

was behind us some'ers—they had to be. But Jake's stubborn like he always is, an' he combs the Emigrants industrious. Where we was in the Emigrants wasn't more'n ninety or a hundred miles to the Bend, so I decided to come right along on an' let Jake an' the others scatter round all they wanted."

"But what did yuh come bawlin' out in the Broken Dollar for about me not waitin' for yuh, huh?"

"On account o' that Bale Harper feller. This mornin' at Rocket—I spent the last half o' the night at Sinclair's, an' he was there, too—he saddles up when I do an' allows if I'm going north he'll trail along. Says he gets lonesome, an' likes to talk. Now he ain't exactly curious, this Bale ain't, but he shore does like to talk an' is one easy sport to make friends with. He don't make it hard for yuh to up-end yore whole life's history into his ears if yuh want to. No sir, yuh could do it without a struggle. An' I can't get rid o' him.

"We stopped at a ranch along about noon, an' he wants to rest his hoss, so I says I'll be pushin' along. He says maybe his hoss ain't so tired after all an' he strings his chips with mine all the way to the Bend. So I figured when he come into the saloon after me the only thing I could do was to bluff him by partly tellin' the truth. I dunno nothin' about that jigger outside o' what I'm tellin' yuh, but I'm bettin' he's a bad actor. He's got a bad eye more ways than one."

"An' yuh say he didn't ask any questions?"

"None to take offence at."

"No, he wouldn't, but did he say anythin' a-tall about any places?"

"Places?"

"Shore, places—towns, hills, creeks, the like o' that."

Racey thought hard.

"Seems to me now he did say somethin' about the Dogville trail."

Now Dogville is an infinitesimal hamlet dotting the bluff at the junction of the Dogsoldier and the Lazy rivers. Yet an occasional freighter goes to Dogville, and there is a trail connecting the village with the Bend trail north of Cutter. This trail runs within a mile of the Anvil ranch house.

"What did he say about the Dogville trail?" questioned Johnny.

"Said, 'Wasn't she a helluva trail?' or somethin'."

"What did you say?"

"I says I didn't know—never followed the trail in my life."

"Yuh didn't!" painful amazement rode Johnny's tone.

"Shore, why not?"

"Tell yuh later. Was the Dogville trail all he asked about?"

"Cutter—yeah, Cutter. Had Tommy Mull changed the whiskey at his hotel yet, an' I says, 'No, same old whiskey she always was.' Playin' foxy myself, see—lettin' him think I come through Cutter."

"Oh, yore a ringtail whizzer, Racey! Honest, if yuh had any more sense you'd be half-witted!"

"What did I do I'd like to know. Didn't I hafta say somethin' to yuh in the saloon? Didn't I hafta, huh? I'm askin' yuh, didn't I?"

"You was all right in the saloon. It was before yuh got there yuh was all wrong."

"I'd admire to know why," grumbled the offended Racey.

"This is why: yuh was ridin' an Anvil hoss, wasn't yuh? An' yuh said yuh never rode the Dogville trail in yore life. Harper met yuh on the Bend trail. All right, yuh never seen the Dogville trail, so he tries yuh again with Tommy Mull's whiskey at Cutter. You told him she was the same old whiskey, didn' yuh?"

"Shore."

"Right there he got yuh. Ten days ago Tommy Mull got religion an' run every drop o' whiskey he owned out on the grass. Since then yuh couldn't get a drink in Tommy's place if yuh was dyin'. An' you played foxy by blattin' out 'She's the same ol' whiskey'!"

Racey was dumb for a space.

"I shore put my foot in it, I guess," he mourned, when Johnny had rolled a scornful cigarette.

"That Anvil hoss showed yuh'd been west o' the Bend trail some'ers," said Johnny, sticking the cigarette in his mouth for a dry smoke, "an because yuh didn't know nothin' o' the Dogville trail nor Tommy's gettin' religion showed yuh'd been romancin' round the country north an' west o' Cutter. He could see by the condition o' the hoss yuh'd been shovin' along hard an' fast. An' a fellah in this country don't shove his hoss unless he's a hoss thief or in a posse."

"Maybe he took me for a hoss thief," suggested Racey, hopefully.

"O' course if you was yuh'd ride along with him the way yuh did an' yuh'd bring the hoss here to the Bend, where the brand's known, wouldn't yuh?"

"Well——"

"Racey, I'll bet he knows yuh was part of a posse."

"Can't help it. How could I guess all this?"

"If we're agoin' to corral these road agents you'll hafta

guess a lot more'n this. Djever stop to think Harper may be one o' the Farewell killers?"

"He ain't," said Racey, eager to be of some use. "He was at Rocket nearly a week. I heard Dave Sinclair say so."

"He was, was he? Guess now I'll just go down an' have a li'l talk with Dave."

"Do yuh think that Bale Harper feller is in with the road agents?" asked Racey, lugubriously hugging his knees.

"I dunno. He's somethin' off colour, whatever his game is, or he'd never 'a' made them breaks about the Dogville trail an' Tommy Mull's whiskey. Look here, Racey, didn't nobody see *nothin'* o' the jiggers that downed Lute Holloway?"

"It was dark, I tell yuh. All Bill Lainey an' Mike Flynn an' me could see was so many shadders a-flyin' past."

"Think now. Scratch yore head if yuh gotta, but think. You talked to Slim after he was shot, didn't yuh?"

"Shore, but——"

"An' yuh heard him talk, didn't yuh? Now, what——"

"Everybody was runnin' round, I tell yuh, Johnny. How can I remember?"

"If yuh'll shut up about a minute an' gimme a chance I'll show yuh how yuh can remember maybe. You an' as many as could was all in the room with Slim. There was Slim a-layin' on the bed with Doc Kramer swabbin' at his nicks an' puttin' on bandages. They's the lamp lit, an' somebody's a-holdin' it so's Doc can see to work, an' Bill Lainey's breathin' hard an' shufflin' his feet, an' Slim's a-talkin' kind o' gaspy, an' yuh gotta scrouge

forrard so's yuh can hear what he's sayin'. Now what did he say besides that about they bein' four of 'em an' Lute's runnin' out first? Nemmine how I know it. I know. Now, what did Slim say?"

Thus adjured, Racey strove to live again his part in the scene reconstructed by Johnny Ramsay. There was Slim lying on the blood-stained blankets of the bed. Doc Kramer had cut his shirt and trousers away. There were tourniquets on both legs. Slim was talking—wheezing rather. What was he saying—something about a horse, wasn't it? Yes, that was it. A light-coloured horse. And one of the riders wore no hat. Slim saw him against the stars. Was there anything else? Racey Dawson scratched his head, closed tight his eyes, but could not remember another word of what Slim had said. He opened his eyes and hitched nearer his friend.

"I thought maybe yuh could tell me somethin' if yuh tried," observed Johnny, when Racey had unbosomed himself. "A light-coloured cayuse, huh? Dun, maybe?"

"Can't say. Slim didn't."

"An' the gent with no hat—was he ridin' this light hoss?"

"He was ridin' one o' the others. I remember Slim sayin' that. He seen him plain against the stars after he'd fell down—Slim fell down."

"No hat. Now, why wouldn't he wear a hat, I wonder?" pondered Johnny.

"Maybe he lost it," contributed Racey.

"Maybe he had it tied to his saddle-strings. Maybe she was a odd hat or somethin' an' he was afraid somebody'd recognize it. Maybe she was a wide white hat with a high crown, higher than most. Djeever see a hat like that, Racey?"

"The red-head!" Racey's whisper was sharp. "He had a hat like that!"

"He shore had, an' comin' back after Slim would be what he'd do if he got the chance."

"Slim did run him out o' town kind o' abrupt."

"That light-coloured hoss—yuh can't tell. She might 'a' been a dun."

"S'pose she was. What of it?"

"A lot maybe. Wait till to-morrow an' we'll go over the whole thing with Telescope—— Oh, that was easy. I guessed it. O' course Slim was a-layin' on the bed. Where else would he lay? An' somebody'd hafta hold the lamp so's Doc could work, an' Bill Lainey always breathes hard an' shuffles his feet when he's interested, an' Slim couldn't help talkin' gaspy if he had three holes in him. So there y'are. Le's go to bed."

CHAPTER XII

LAGUERRE TALKS

WHAT was Mat Neville comin' north for?" demanded Johnny.

"I know, but——"

"Aw, yuh make me sick, Racey. It stands to reason, don't it, Telescope?"

"S'pose now dey fin' de hat een Farewell, un she ees not a w'ite hat?" evaded the half-breed.

"I'm gamblin' they won't find it. Anyhow I'm writin' to Jake Rule to find out for sure. But you can bet she's them three hold-ups an' the red-head, an' he tied his hat on his saddle so's she wouldn't give him away. It's just what he would do."

"He would if he did." Thus cryptically Mr. Dawson.

"An' three men with him. Where'd he get three men together to try an' down Slim an' Holloway outside o' the road agent crowd?"

"Holloway had enemies. So'd Slim."

"Shore, but scatterin'. A gent here, another there, an' all in different parts o' the county. They might lay for Lute an' Slim separate, but they'd never organize four in a bunch. If I could only be sure that light-coloured hoss was a black-tail dun. Anyway, one of 'em was usin' a forty sixty-five. That's somethin'."

"One t'ing," observed Laguerre: "eef de red-head she belong to de hold-up outfit, w'y don' she stop de stage

wit' de res'? De men w'at have do dat are seex foot mab-beso, but dees man wit' de red hair she ees seex foot four, un no one was ever see man tall as dat stop de stage or rob de minair."

"I know that," agreed Johnny. "I've asked a heap o' folks an' none of 'em have ever seen a gent like this red-head, but djever stop to think that the folks he holds up might be too dead to talk about it afterward?"

"Dat ees true," nodded Laguerre.

"But somebody's got to see him if he is one of 'em," said Racey.

"Somebody will—if he is. How about that stage-station job, Racey, or would yuh rather toss up for the stray man end?"

"Not me. I'll get a job in town myself. She's a right nice li'l place—good scenery, good folks."

"Yeah." Suspiciously.

"They's a right handsome-lookin' lady in the Bend, an' I aim to meet her. Yessir, I'm satisfied to give my hoss a rest."

"Who's the lady?" acute interest mixed with the suspicion.

"The one behind the wheel at the Broken Dollar. Say——"

"He's off!" cried the greatly relieved Johnny. "When Racey Dawson starts talkin' about a girl, he's good for all day. Le's go away an' leave him, Telescope."

The three had rendezvoused in a thickly wooded gulch on the eastern slope of Old Baldy. In accordance with their plan Johnny and Laguerre rode from there straight to the Flying M and Racey Dawson returned to the Bend. Racey had not informed his two friends of his intention to loaf about town a few days before starting to work.

There was no hurry. And roulette is a fascinating game. Besides, there was Bale Harper to be investigated. He couldn't do that very well if he were working. Of course not. He had more than a hundred dollars in his poke, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Racey crooked a leg round his saddle-horn and whistled the "Rakes of Mallow" with joy and abandon. An easy conscience is a wonderful thing.

Johnny and Laguerre were openly and loudly hired by Scotty Mackenzie ten minutes after their arrival at the Flying M. The foreman, Doubleday of the sharp nose and sharper eye, took them at their face value and sent them down to the bunkhouse. Doubleday did not fully comprehend the necessity of two stray men, but he knew Scotty to be a creature of whims. No one ever even dreamt of questioning Scotty's whims. So when the old ranchman said that he himself would give the new men their orders, Doubleday merely shifted his quid and dismissed the subject from his mind.

The next morning Johnny and Laguerre rode away southward. That men might know of the place and manner of their employment the two rode Flying M horses and carried open letters signed by Scotty.

"Guess maybe we'd better stop in the Bend, Telescope," said Johnny when the town was less than a mile away. "I—we gotta see what Racey's doin'."

"Shore, un I wan' for see w'at dat Meestair Slay she was do."

"Got any idea what for a gent he is yet, Telescope? I didn't see yuh look him over very close."

"I was look all right. But I do not let you see me look, un I do not let heem see me look. I am not de fool, me. Well, I tell you, Johnny, she ees not easy for tell what she

ees lak. I know dees, she ees de one w'at do de beeg t'ing. She would not be satisfy wit' less."

"What yuh mean?"

"I mean eef she ees de rustlair she would not rustle forty cow, she would rustle 'ole dam herd. Eef she steal de money, she would steal not feefty-seexty dollar, she would tak ten t'ousan'. Now you see."

"I see."

"Un she ees clevailr, dees man. By gar, she have de brain. Dose t'ing I see. More dan dat, no."

The half-breed's expressive shrug was a direct legacy from his French father.

"But," he continued harshly, "w'at I can not see, I can guess."

"That's easy. So can I guess."

"We do not guess de same, mabbeso. Leesten. Las' night I was talk wit' Scotty un she tell me w'at she know about dees Slay un hees seestair, how dey was come from Cheecawgo, un de seestair she ride de pony lak one bustair un was not run' round wit' de men un Slay she mak money een de Broken Dollar. All right, dat ees fine, honess' beesness, but she ees small beesness. She ees too small for man lak Slay. Un de seestair—Johnny, have you ever see de beeg ceety?"

"I been east to Cheyenne once."

"Yeah, Cheyenne ees de ceety, but she ees not de beeg ceety. By gar, me, I have see Kebec un Montreal un Ottawa w'en I was boy, un dere een dat plass I was see *les grandes demoiselles*, not de dance-hall girl wit' de paint un de smile lak one spidair, but de great, great lady all dress up een de seelk un de feddair wit' de fine leetle buckle' shoe, un I tell you dey was somet'ing for see.

"*Bon Dieu*, I was so close to dem I could touch dem, me. But I deed not. I was 'fraid, un I step off de sidewalk. But I was watch, always I was watch, un I was een dat plass t'ree year, un I say dat w'en I go 'way I know de lady w'en I see her. Un dat ees w'at Mees Wallace ees. She ees all same one o' dem *grandes demoiselles* een Kebec un Montreal un Ottawa."

"You mean you seen her there?" Johnny was obviously skeptical.

"No, I was not see her. I mean she ees lak dem. She ees *une grande demoiselle*, un she have de brain behin' de eye, too. Well den, I say, me, w'y a man un a lady, bot' wit' de brain un de lady a *grande demoiselle*, w'y dey come here to dees plass, dees plass w'ere dere ees nuttin' but de heel un de cow un de pony?"

Johnny bethought him of Texas Pete, the two cigarettes and the one match. Did *grandes demoiselles* act that way? He wondered. Laguerre misinterpreted his silence.

"Dere now, you see w'at I see," he exclaimed in triumph, "un you guess w'at I guess. Money was bring dem, un eet was not de money een de Broken Dollar."

"I been thinkin' some o' Friend Slay that way, myself," admitted Johnny, "an' the more I think of it, the more I like the notion. But that ain't provin' it's so none. Yuh know it's plumb easy to believe a thing when yuh want to. When I said somethin' to Scotty about Slay an' the bandits he couldn't see it a-tall. Don't like Slay none, he says, but he's gotta give him his due an' say they ain't a thing against him. Slay's always in town when they's hold-ups, except this last one, o' course, an' I know he wasn't in that.

"Deed I not say Meestair Slay she have de brain?" asked Laguerre softly.

"Sort o' sits back an' lets the other feller work, huh?"

"We weel see, mabbeso."

On their way through town they stopped at the Burr house.

"She ain't home," the voice of young Sammy Barnes shouted from the corral. Young Sammy poked his head turtle-wise through the bars of the gate and smiled a knowing smile that reached clear across his face. And it was a wide face.

"Ain't Mis' Burr got back from Jack Creek yet?" A clever blend of surprise and dignity on the part of Mr. Ramsay.

"You didn't come to see Mis' Burr!" retorted the turtle in loud, unsympathetic tones. "You come to see Dor-thy! Whatcha bluffin' for, huh? Can't fool me! I seen yuh! Yo're stuck on Dor'thy, that's whatcha are!"

Had the state of being stuck on Dorothy been a most flagitious offense Johnny could not have reddened more enthusiastically. He seethed inwardly with a great seething. Mrs. Mace, residing a few houses nearer Main Street, hurried outdoors to shake a dust-rag. Mrs. Carey and Tug Wilson's sister both had business on their doorsteps. Interested heads appeared at various open windows.

"Harry-Slay-give her-'nother-box o'-candy-yest'day-why-don'tchu-give-her-some?"

Which breathless and run-together combination statement and question was delivered in the childish squawk of Mrs. Carey's eight-year-old. Mrs. Carey disappeared within. Followed then the sound of smackings punctuated by anguished wails. An appreciative giggle, starting with Tug Wilson's sister, ran about the street.

Johnny Ramsay, illogically hating women and small children with cordial intensity, wheeled his horse and rode

off—at a restrained walk that he mistakenly hoped would not be construed as a retreat under fire. But the giggle followed him to the corner of Main Street.

It is true that all the world loves a lover. But it does not love two lovers. It laughs heartily and makes bets on the outcome. Johnny, recognizing with mental writhing the factuality of these things, failed to comprehend why he should be classed as one of the lovers. True, he had called on the lady, but not conspicuously. True again, he admired the lady, but likewise not conspicuously—at least this is what he told himself.

That he should be stirred to irritation by Dorothy's seemingly complacent acceptance of Slay's attentions was but natural. The gambler was much too equivocal a character to be comradely with a young girl. Such a friendship did the aforesaid young girl no good. Johnny's concern was all for the young girl. Of course, she was precisely what he had told Scotty, merely a friend. Absolutely nothing more. Quite so. The greatest playwright of them all says something somewhere relative to protesting too much. The rule doubtless will continue to hold good till the end of time.

Johnny did not forget his declaration to Scotty to the effect that, as no one else seemed disposed to protect Dorothy from the man Slay, he himself would attend to the matter. He realized in bitterness of soul that he was not making good.

"Look dere!" Laguerre said surprisedly.

Johnny looked. Ahead of them the stage company's horses were being driven by a hostler to water. Racey, in overalls, mounted bareback on a shoeless animal, was talking to the hostler.

"When yuh get back," Racey was saying, "put on some

axle-grease to keep the flies off that V T hoss where he cut himself an' scout round after that neck-yoke. Tug says she's near the big corral some'ers."

The hostler departed in the dust of his tittuping charges, and Racey looked into the faces of his two friends and smiled—one-sidedly, his upper lip being bruised and puffed to twice its normal size. Racey's right eye was thoroughly blackened and an abrasion marked the left side of his jaw. There were several scratches on his nose and the knuckles of both hands were skinned.

"What hit yuh?" asked Johnny.

"Skinny Devinney, the station boss," replied Racey.

"Don't blame him. What was yuh tryin' to do?"

"I was just arguin' with him."

"Arguin'?"

"Shore. I asks him for a job all so pretty and polite, an' he says somethin' about not wantin' no feller in hair pants a-workin' for him. Then I just naturally had to argue with him."

Johnny's eyes strayed toward the combined stage station and express office. Below one of the windows pieces of broken glass and splintered sash littered the ground.

"Looks like the window got busted," hazarded Johnny.

"He done it—on his way out," explained Racey. "He didn't want to go," he added thoughtfully.

Johnny's eyes rested on Racey's battered features.

"I expect," he said dryly. "I notice he gave yuh a job."

"Yeah, he gimme his. Yuh see, after he'd went, there was the job left an orphan an' there was me, an' Tug Wilson he says it looked just like Providence. He never did like the other feller anyway. Me, I'm the station boss myself."

"Lucky for you Devinney didn't have a gun," observed Johnny. "Yuh better keep yore eye skinned, Racey. She's just possible he may organize with one an' come back a-huntin' him his job."

"He—he had a gun," Racey said in some embarrassment. "I kind o' had to pry it away from him before he'd act decent a-tall."

Laguerre laughed delightedly.

"Didn't he try to throw down?" demanded Johnny.

"Oh, he tried," admitted Racey.

"Yuh bat's-eyed ol' son-of-a-gun," Johnny drawled in keenest admiration.

"See yuh later," grinned Racey. "Gotta take this accordeen to the blacksmith. So long."

Johnny stared after Racey, and his brows drew together.

"More I think of it," he observed to Laguerre, "the less I like this rastlin' round with Skinny Devinney. Seems like she was kind of unnecessary an' a heap likely to come high for Racey. He's only a kid, an' he's reckless. An' I've heard Skinny was a hard customer."

"Le's go see heem," was Laguerre's suggestion.

But the ex-station-boss was not to be found in the Bend. Following the removal of his gun from his person, and his person from his job, Skinny Devinney had saddled a horse and pulled his freight.

"An' I always thought Skinny was a fighter," their bartending informant remarked with disgust. "After gettin' his cork pulled thataway he can't never show up in this town again, that's a cinch—— Shore, but throat's a leetle raw this mornin'. I'll take a cigar, if yuh don't mind."

"Help yoreself. We'll take about twenty-five apiece ourselves. I like a good smoke, I do, an' I don't guess

we'll run up on any cigars like these here in the Yellow Medicine country."

"Ridin' there, huh?"

"Between the Medicine an' Dry Creek. Seven an' four-bits? Here y'are. Le's wander, Telescope."

"Good morning, Mister Ramsay."

It was a gay and Sunday morning voice that spoke, and Johnny, in the act of mounting, slid his foot from the stir-rup and turned, dragging off his hat. Mrs. Wallace smiled up into his face with eyes and mouth.

"G'mornin', ma'am," said Johnny, and wished Telescope would go away.

But the halfbreed had no intention of doing any such thing. He sat quite still in the saddle, rolling a cigarette, and unobtrusively observing the lady from under his hat brim. Johnny, greatly against his will, was forced to introduce him. Laguerre swept off his hat, bowed to the saddle-horn, and commented upon the state of the weather.

The lady, with her brilliant friendly smile, concurred as to the heat, and again turned her graceful head toward Johnny.

"You haven't forgotten about coming to see me?" she said in a low tone.

"Now, ma'am, how could I?" was Johnny's answer.

"To-night?" The black eyes pleaded.

"I thought——" He jerked his head toward the Broken Dollar.

"I'm not working to-night. I take a vacation now and then. This evening will be then. Do come. I'll be all alone." The black eyes pleaded harder.

"I'd shore like to. But I can't to-night. I ain't a-goin' to be in town. I'm workin' for Scotty now."

"It isn't far from the ranch if—if you really want to

come." The long curving lashes were lowered and she was poking with her parasol at a crack in the sidewalk.

"It ain't case o' want, ma'am," protested Johnny. "But by to-night I'll be in Rocket. To-morrow me an' my friend'll be over east o' the Yellow Medicine some'ers. We'll work back to the Flyin' M by way of Dry Creek, the Seven Lazy Seven, an' Cavalry Valley. Two weeks, ma'am, before I'll see the Bend again."

"Oh, I am sorry," said she; "but you'll come to see me when you return, won't you?"

"Shore will."

Again the red lips parted in their fascinating smile. She inclined head and shoulders in a little bow that included Laguerre, swung her parasol and strolled away along the sidewalk, a joy to all beholders.

"You know Mees Dorothy Burr, huh?" asked the half-breed, when they had passed from Main Street to the Farewell trail.

"Shore, I know her. Why?"

"She un Slay dey was ride by w'ile you was talk wit' de *grande demoiselle*."

"Yeah." Outwardly uninterested.

"Yeah, she look at you leetle, den leetle more, den she was look at Slay, un laugh un talk fas'."

"Huh." Still the outward lack of interest.

"Eet ees hard for drive two pony," said Laguerre.

"What's drivin' two cayuses gotta do with me, I'd like to know?"

"I was jus' say so." Laguerre shrugged Gallic shoulders.

"I have been de scout, I have leeve wit' Enjun. I see w'at I see. I be damfool eef I do not."

"Say, Telescope, what yuh talkin' about anyhow?"

"I was jus' talk," evaded Laguerre, dropping his off

eyelid. "You deed not say you was know dees Mees' Wallace w'en I was talk about her de firs' tam."

"Guess I must 'a' forgot. Don't make no difference, does it?"

"She ees smart," Laguerre side-stepped neatly.

"Well?"

"You have tell her lak you tell de bartender w'ere we go."

"Shore I did. I had to. We may be traileed. If we say before we start where we're a-goin' to, an' then go there, they won't be so suspicious. They'll never think we'd say right out where we was lookin' for evidence, would they now?"

"I understan'. You have walk een de watair by tellin' de trut'. But deed I not say dat lady she ees smart? She weel t'ink dat ees jus' w'at you would do, mabbeso."

"She ain't as smart as that," Johnny denied vigorously.

"She ees damsight smarter dan dat, my frien'. I tell you dat lady ees hard for fool, *bien sûr*."

"Yo're always lookin' on the black side, y' ol' wet blanket."

"Aw right, you weel see," said Laguerre, nodding sagely.
"Gimme de match."

CHAPTER XIII

RIDERS AT ROCKET

JOHNNY'S face was not wearing its usual expression of cheer and well-being as its owner rode the trail to Rocket. At times he reddened and shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. For the voice of the turtle and the squawk of Mrs. Carey's chicken kept tingling in his ears. It did not alleviate his sense of oppression that Miss Burr had passed unseen while he dallied with Mrs. Wallace. Dorothy would surely think he had meant to slight her. Of course she would. He knew girls possessed the objectionable habit of reasoning things out the wrong way. Not that it made any real difference. Why should it?

"W'at you swear for all tam?" inquired the mildly curious halfbreed.

"I'm so hot," was the sole explanation he got from Johnny.

Late in the evening they reached that collection of two dozen houses, three saloons, one store, and one hotel known as Rocket. They were forced to awaken Dave Sinclair, the hotel-keeper. But he received them joyfully, for they were his friends, and set before them cold beans and fried ham.

"Hear about the shootin' down at Farewell?" asked Dave, humanly anxious to tell a good story.

"Yeah," Johnny replied.

"Tough on Lute," said the disappointed Dave, "but Whiskey tells me Slim will pull through all fine an' dandy. Good feller, Slim."

"She ees all dat," averred Laguerre.

"How's tricks, Dave?" Thus Johnny, between stuffed mouthfuls.

"Don't do no good to kick."

"Many folks stoppin' here?"

"Not so many. Had Bale Harper for a week an' a young feller from the Anvil—leastwise he was ridin' that brand—for a night. But both of 'em drifted north together. There ain't nobody but me here now, an' you fellers. Guess that coffee'd oughta be about b'iled. Shore. Here she is."

"That wall eye of Bale's gives me the creeps," observed Johnny, spading in the sugar.

"She is kind of gloomersome. Always lookin' where he ain't, Bale is. I've heard he can shoot a few with a Winchester, but damfino how he does it, unless he aims with both eyes an' strikes an' average before he cuts loose."

"Bale's got a li'l ranch some'ers, ain't he?" hazarded Johnny.

"Shore has, him an' Spill together," affirmed the guileless Dave. "Some'ers back of the Medicine Mountains on Dry Creek."

"She ain't much of an outfit, I guess."

"Not much. Just a few cows an' hosses. They don't need steady lookin' after."

"Guess that suits Bale."

"Shore. He ain't there a whole lot. Aw, he's like his brother Spill—too strong to work. How's Scotty Mackenzie?"

"Same old silvertip. Got the notion now, he has, that

a black-tail dun is the only colour o' hoss worth cinchin' a hull on. Course a black-tail dun is a tough, strong colour, but she ain't the only hoss in the world by a jugful. Me personal I think a heap of the chestnut with a black stripe. Any black-tail duns round here, Dave?"

"Ain't seen a black-tail dun in two years. A buck was ridin' that one."

"Injun, hey? Stallion, was he? Old?"

"Mare, an' young."

"That's just as good. Maybe Mister Warwhoop would sell. What was his name?"

"Black Bear."

"Fort Yardley Reservation?"

"I guess. You ain't thinkin' of ridin' there, are yuh?"

"I ain't makin' a point of it, but if I'm ever over toward the Hatchet Creek country I'll shorely look up Mister Black Bear an' see will he sell. Likely he has though— if she was a good hoss."

"She was that all right—full o' life like a charge o' giant. Droppin' the rein never did to anchor her. Black Bear used to carry a rope for that special."

"He did, huh? Must 'a' been a reg'lar hoss. Coffee-pot dry, Dave?"

Thuddy-thud, thuddy-thud, a pony was being loped along the trail from the south. Before Johnny finished filling his cup the pony had stopped in front of the hotel. There was no immediate sound of the rider's dismounting, and Johnny saw that the man was looking into the dining room through the open doorway. The horse moved forward a step or two.

"Lookin' through the window now," Johnny told himself, stirring rapidly. "He shore is one careful gent."

Twenty seconds later there was a creak and a thump

as the cautious one dismounted. He entered with spurs a-jingle, hooked out a chair with his toe and plumped himself down opposite Johnny. The latter's nerves were under too excellent control to permit a start of surprise. He looked pleasantly instead into the face of the tall red-headed stranger who had killed Mat Neville.

"Howdy, gents," nodded the red-head to the three men, displaying as he slightly smiled the canines at the left side of his mouth. "I'm in luck. I shore never expected to get anythin' to eat at this time o' night."

"Yore expectations may be right at that," said Dave Sinclair sourly.

"Oh, I got money."

The stranger laughed in sinister fashion and spun a silver dollar on the oilcloth. His eyes gleamed yellowly in the shadow of his high-crowned white hat.

"I'd shore like some hot coffee," he added softly. "Stranger"—to Johnny—"will yuh shove them beans this way so they'll be all ready when my plate an' trimmin's arrive."

"This here runnin' a hotel ain't a business," gloomed Dave on his way to the kitchen, "it's a exercise."

The red-head winked solemnly at Johnny and Laguerre and planted bony elbows on the table.

"Cool night," he remarked genially, smiling his dog-oothed smile, turning his blank, fixed stare on Johnny.

The eyelids dropped a trifle. The man passed a hand across his hairless face. "Damn cool night," he added, and began to spoon beans from the dish to his plate.

Johnny wondered whether the red-head had recognized him and Laguerre. He determined to find out.

"She's a long ride from Farewell kind of," observed Johnny.

"Shore," said the red-head, looking up from his plate, "I recognized yuh—both of yuh. I don't forget faces. Can't afford to. Yuh'll notice I'm keepin' away from Farewell—now."

"Meanin'?" Johnny asked easily.

"Meanin' that I might come back. Yuh never can tell."

"That's right. Yuh can't."

Johnny and Laguerre left the red-head to his beans and departed bedward. In whispers, at the open window of their room, they debated the significance of the red-head's arrival. Laguerre was of the opinion that it disposed of Johnny's theory that the man had been concerned in the murder of Lute Holloway and the wounding of the marshal.

"Eef she was meex up een dat she was not come w'ere de deputy can fin' heem," pronounced the halfbreed.

"That's just what he would do," declared Johnny. "He's no fool, an' besides he dunno he's suspected."

"W'y she not know? You jus' say she was no fool. She guess eet easy, I tell you."

Thus they argued in a circle, after the fashion of detectives, amateur and professional, and each went to bed convinced that the other fellow did not know what he was talking about.

In the morning Johnny was up very betimes. He first visited the bar-room, where, in a corner, the red-head's saddle lay. Johnny dragged the Winchester from the worn scabbard under the near fender, found the caliber to be forty-five ninety, and disappointedly slid the rifle back. Then he went to the corral and carefully inspected the red-head's horse, an unbranded blue, the same animal on which he had ridden away from Farewell. With due

consideration for eyes, prying and otherwise, Johnny, while apparently having great difficulty in bridling his own astonished pony, forced the red-head's blue to skip briskly hither and yon.

Clumsily Johnny buckled the throat-latch and reached one hand down into a side pocket of his trousers. When he withdrew the hand, a handkerchief and several pieces of small change came with it. The handkerchief went to wipe his face. The small change bounded gaily in all directions. Swearing heartily, Johnny stooped and set about retrieving his wealth. When the last coin was in his pocket and he straightened he had an excellent working knowledge of the size, shape and appearance of the four shoe-marks of the brandless blue.

In order to carry out the illusion he threw on and cinched his saddle and led his horse to the hitching-rail in front of the hotel. Then he went in to breakfast. The red-head, his mouth a-yawn, came down as Johnny and Laguerre were finishing.

"Goin' my way, gents?" he asked, rubbing his tousled red hair.

"If yo're goin' south," Johnny said smilelessly.

"Now that's shore a calamity," mourned the other. "I'm travelin' north, but I shore hoped for company."

While Laguerre was catching up his mount Johnny sat slouched in his saddle and smoked and watched an approaching dust-cloud on the trail they were to take. By the time Laguerre was mounted Johnny saw within the dust-cloud the hazy outlines of three horsemen.

"Looks like Bill Stahl's hoss?" suggested Johnny.

"She ees Beel Stahl," declared Laguerre.

Humanly curious, they waited in front of the hotel.

"Jack Murgatroyd, too," said Johnny.

Murgatroyd was one of the sheriff's two deputies, a silent, swarthy man with eyes small and bright as black beads.

"The middle one's wearin' the come-alongs," amplified Johnny. "Know him?"

Laguerre shook his head. The trio rode up and the sheriff and his deputy dismounted. The officers nodded and gave brief greeting to the two stray men and turned to help down their handcuffed prisoner. Before the three could enter the hotel Johnny contrived to catch the sheriff's eye.

"Take him in an' give him his breakfast, Jack," said the sheriff instantly. "I'll be in later."

Sheriff Stahl picked up the bridles of the three horses and led them round the corner of the hotel.

"Gimme a lift, will yuh, Johnny?" he called back.

"We both will," cried Johnny.

"This is shore neighbourly," said the sheriff, his china-blue eyes twinkling, when they relieved him of two horses.

"Ain't it?" grinned Johnny. "Who's yore friend?"

"Murderer named Hen Riley. Killed a barkeep over at Single. He didn't really mean to do it. He was drunk at the time an' nobody liked the barkeep anyway, so I guess Hen 'll get off all right."

"I thought maybe he might be one o' the bandits."

"Not Hen. He's a prospector. Wouldn't hurt a flea—when he's sober."

"The fellah that killed Mat Neville's inside." Johnny jerked his head toward the hotel.

"He is!"

"Shore as yo're a foot high. Yuh'll find him in the dinin'-room eatin' beans by the mile."

"Wait here till I come back," ordered the sheriff.

Bill Stahl entered the hotel by way of the kitchen. Within three minutes he returned, rolling a sorrowful cigarette.

"Dunno him a-tall," he informed the two. "An' he don't remind me o' nothin' or nobody I ever seen before."

"That's tough," said Johnny simply. "I guess we'll be weavin' along, Bill."

But, as they wove, they stopped at the Blue Front Store and asked for forty sixty-five cartridges.

"Don't keep 'em," the proprietor told them. "No call for them half an' half calibers. Forty-five ninety an' thirty-eights all I got."

"Djever keep forty sixty-fives?" persisted Johnny.

"Not since I been keepin' store here, an' that's more'n three years."

This was final and seemed to dispose of Rocket as an ammunition dump for the bandit with the odd-calibered rifle. Johnny and Laguerre went into the street and picked up their bridles. Before they could mount a hatless man on a pinto dashed round the corner of the hotel corral. Somewhere behind the hotel sounded the smacking thud of a six-shooter. The hatless man, looking from side to side, raced his pony down the street. He glimpsed Johnny and Laguerre and cut in toward them instantly. The rider's mouth was open, his eyes were staring, his scanty gray hair flickered in the breeze. He looked frightened. He probably was.

Another horseman swung past the corner of the hotel corral. He threw down with a jerk. Johnny and Laguerre, dragging their horses by the bridles, scrambled across the sidewalk. *Bang!* The pony of the pursued fell on its knees. The gray-haired man tumbled over the saddle-horn, rolled to one side, struggled to his feet, and

ran toward Johnny and Laguerre, wildly flapping his arms.

"Gents! Gents!" he gasped, his eyes now fairly starting out of his head. "Listen! I can tell!——"

Bang! The accurate six-shooter of his pursuer put in its period. The expression of the gray-haired man underwent a change in a breath. From extreme fright it veered to one of intense surprise. The upraised leg came down. But there was no strength in the knee-joint, and the man fell forward on the ground in the grotesque attitude of one praying in a mosque. There he remained, quite still, and thin trickles of blood seeped downward from a hole in each temple and soaked into the dust of the street.

Johnny and Laguerre returned across the sidewalk. The man with the six-shooter rode up and dismounted. He was a tall young man with alert, animal eyes, prominent jawbones, and a silver star. Johnny knew him. He was Chance Blaisdell, Sheriff Stahl's other deputy.

From saloons, houses, the store and the hotel, folk came hurriedly and gathered about the deputy sheriff and the poor huddled thing that lay at his feet. Blaisdell nonchalantly threw out the cylinder of his six-shooter, ejected the spent shells and reloaded. Sheriff Stahl, wiping his mustache on his sleeve, pushed through the silent crowd and stood beside the deputy.

"What's the trouble, Chance?" he asked, his eyes on the body of the dead man.

Chance gave a perceptible start. Then he laughed shortly.

"Didn't know you was in town, Bill," he said. "Bein' as yo're here it'll save me makin' out a report. This feller got away from me, an' I had to down him."

"Who was he?"

"One o' the hold-ups that robbed the Wells-Fargo office at Cutter night before last."

"Huh?" The crowd murmured surprisedly.

"Shore. Didn't yuh know? Yep. The gang—they was three of 'em—blowed in the safe, creased the agent twice in one leg, shot the gun out of his hand an' got away with twenty-five hundred dollars. Me, I'm sleepin' at the hotel with that brand-blotter I'm takin' down to Farewell for Jake Rule, an' I hopped out immediate—Shore, he's safe. Barkeep's guardin' him with a shot-gun. I rustled a posse an' we trailed them bouncin' jiggers toward the Emigrant Hills. Half-way there they separated an' we done the same. Yesterday afternoon I was scoutin' up the country round Crow Creek, an' I jumped this here feller.

"I throwed down on him, an' he tried to get away. I dropped his hoss, an' he caves. I herds him along to Cooley's ranch, got him this pinto an' brought him along. I didn't tie him or nothin'—he acted so like he was sick I felt sorry for him. Would yuh believe it, Bill, he got away from me back there on the woods a piece an' I didn't come up on him till he surged in back o' the corral. I missed him the first shot, but I shore got his hoss the second. That didn't satisfy him. He kept right on tryin' to jump the reservation, an' I had to down him. I'll bet yuh," he added regretfully, "he'd 'a' had a lot of interestin' stuff to tell at the trial."

"Yuh'd oughta been more careful," chided the sheriff. "Next time you drill a leg or somethin'. It's just as good, an' don't hinder the feller's talkin' a little bit."

"Maybe I was a little excited," admitted the deputy.

"Don't let it happen again, then. Howdja know he's one o' the hold-ups? Follow his trail alla time?"

"Naw, I lost his trail a heap. But we don't need tracks for evidence with this jigger. I found some o' the express money on him in a busted-open Wells-Fargo package an' I found one o' Old Man Fane's buckskin bags with some dust left in her, too."

"Where's the package an' the bag?"

The deputy fumbled importantly in a saddle pocket, drew out a torn packet that gave forth a chinking sound, and a limp, buckskin bag that closed with a drawstring and bulged at one end.

The sheriff and as much of the crowd as could find space—Johnny and Laguerre were among the first to find that space—examined the evidence. The torn packet was indubitably a Wells-Fargo express package designed to contain, as indicated by the figures, five hundred dollars in gold. There were in it precisely twenty-five double eagles. The buckskin bag, when the sheriff had slacked off the drawstring, was found to contain between three and four ounces of gold dust. Marked on the side, in crude lettering, were the initials L. F. Old Man Fane's given name had been Lucius.

"Looks like he done it all right," chattily remarked the red-head, craning his long neck over the hats of two other men.

"Looks are shore queer things—sometimes," drawled Johnny Ramsay, in whose mind the germ of an idea had suddenly been born.

CHAPTER XIV

BECAUSE

WHEN'S Chance goin' to send my pinto back?" demanded querulous Mr. Cooley, combing his whiskers.

"He didn't say," Johnny told him. "Shore y'ain't missed any cayuses?"

"I should say not. Which if I had yuh could hear me yellin' from here to the Yellowstone. Naw sir, the whole seventeen was in the corral this mornin'. I counted 'em. Didja see the prisoner?"

"Shore."

"Hard customer, an' kind o' old, Chance said. It's about time them road agents was beginnin' to be caught. Shore too bad Chance had to down him. I——"

"Didn't you see him—the prisoner?"

"Me? No. Chance he left him tied an' handcuffed to a tree near the Twin Springs while Chance rid over for a hoss for him. I told Chance to ride by here on his way to Rocket so's the wife could see a real road agent—she don't have much fun, Mary don't—but I guess Chance was in a hurry. I ain't seen him since. Say, yo're shore that paint pony was in good health, huh?"

"Yo're shore y'ain't seen any strangers, are yuh?" dodged Johnny.

"No, I ain't. Say, they ain't nothin' happened to that

pinto, did they?" Lively suspicion brightened Mr. Cooley's faded blue eyes.

"Well——" hesitated Johnny.

"What happened him, huh?" Genuine alarm on the part of Mr. Cooley.

"Chance sort o' killed yore pinto by mistake," was Johnny's answer.

"—— Chance Blaisdell to ——!" whooped Mr. Cooley, hopping with rage. "My pinto! I'll learn the —— —— ——! My pinto! By —— I'll take it out o' Chance's hide! What 'n —— does he think he is, shootin' other folks' hosses! I'll make the county pay for that hoss! By —— I will!"

Having extracted all possible information from Mr. Cooley they left that bereft gentleman to enjoy his woe in private. But they could hear his heartfelt curses for quite a while.

From Cooley's ranch they rode to Hall's, a small ranch east of the Anvil. But no one at Hall's had seen any strangers. Nor were any of the horses missing.

At the Anvil, as was to be expected, their luck was similar. The foreman told them what he had told Jake Rule's posse. They rode on to the B bar B. "Baldy" Barbee, the genial old citizen, received them joyously, pressed upon them food and whiskey, but—neither he nor his men had cut the trails of any strangers, and all the B bar B horses were accounted for.

From the B bar B to Dogville is a scant half-day's ride. So Johnny and Laguerre rode to Dogville. They departed as they came—none the wiser.

"S'pose we might as well hit for the Yellow Medicine," said Johnny.

"Shore," grunted Laguerre. "Funny ting nobody

lose de pony. Dem hol'up shore mus' have de strong hoss."

"They must have," drawled Johnny. "What's the use o' ridin' this trail, Telescope? If we turn off here an' head straight for Longhorn Mountain an' then swing north east we'll cross the Bend trail 'way north o' Cutter an' strike the Yellow Medicine south o' Big Tepee. Ought to save us a good thirty mile."

Ridge and wooded valley, mountain and wash and draw, passed beneath their horses' feet and they came at last to a brook a few miles south of Cooley's ranch, where the mountain ash flaunted its bunches of gaudy berries above a riot of box-elder bushes. The tired horses thrust hot noses bit under in the water and the men crooked their knees round their saddle-horns and rolled cigarettes.

"Somethin's dead round here," observed Johnny, flirting a blackened match into the bushes.

A little breeze got up and blew among the box-elders.

"Somethin' shore is dead a whole lot," amplified Johnny, wrinkling an offended nose.

"Over dere beyond dem mountain ash," Laguerre said.

Breathing through their mouths they rode beyond the ash trees. They saw the cause of the nauseous odour. The cause was a dead gray horse in full bloom. Saddled and bridled it lay there a loathly thing in the sunlight. Seven gorged crows sat upon the body and stared torpidly at the intruders. Laguerre waved an arm. Cawing raucous protest, the birds flapped heavily away.

"Legs ain't broken or nothing," observed Johnny, inspecting the horse with a professional eye. "Good hoss, too. H L brand. Ain't been dead more'n a week."

"Hot weadair for tell sartain shore," said Laguerre critically, "but she ees less dead dan a week I tink, me."

"Maybe she's the hoss o' the old feller Chance downed. Didn't he say he jumped him near Crow Creek an' had to kill his hoss? Shore he did. An' right now from here to the creek ain't more'n a few miles. This here's the hoss all right."

"Odder hoss been here too."

"Yeah?"

"Shore. Two—tree—four hoss was tie here to dem mountain ash."

He pointed toward some trees ten yards off.

"How long ago?" asked Johnny.

"I can not tell dat. You know dat lightnin' we see un dat t'undair we hear 'way 'way yondair een de nort'eas' las' night? Well, den, dat storm she come ovair dees plass—see w'ere de rain was t'row leetle mud on dead hoss—un she wash 'way heap o' sign. But she leave 'nough to show dere was four hoss tie to dem ash."

Johnny rode forward and leaned over the saddle-horn, his eyes on the ground.

"Not a hoofmark," he mourned, "an' me with a photograph in my mind o' every one o' that blue's shoes."

"De redhead she was not een dat beezness at Cuttair mabbeso," cheered Laguerre, who had dismounted and was examining closely the trees to which the four horses had been tied.

"Maybe not," gloomed Johnny.

"One o' dese pony was tie wit' de rope," said Laguerre, pulling several threads of manila from the bark of one of the trees.

"Blacktail dun?"

"Dunno. Don' see no hair."

"Must be him. But Chance didn't say a word about jumpin' five men. He only said one."

"Dey was not all here den, mabbeso. De sign does not say de four odder hoss was here w'en dat gray was keel."

"Come to think of it, if they had been here Chance Blaisdell would 'a' been shot shore. He'd 'a' cashed right there, no two ways about it."

"Chance she say dere was t'ree men een dat Cuttair beezness. Here ees five cayuse—de sign o' four un one dead."

"Maybe this dead one was one o' the four."

"I do not tink she was, me. Look how she was head for dem tree w'ere de four was tie w'en she was keel. Eef she was one o' de four she would head away from de tree."

"Maybe the old feller was ridin' away from here an' seen Chance an' turned back with Chance on his trail."

"Ah," exclaimed Laguerre in triumph. "W'en a man ees chasse he ride fas' he can. Look de ground behin' de dead hoss. Sof', you see. Well, den, eef de hoss was gallop hees hoofmark was show, *bien sûr*. She was be drive een so deep she was stay dere eef she rain all day steady. Un I know she was not rain more dan one—two hour, un dere ees no mark. Dat show de gray hoss was walk to dees plass. She was stand steel or walk w'en she was keel. Now you tink de ol' man was ride heem, huh?"

"I dunno," Johnny said helplessly. "I dunno what to think. She's one puzzle. That's a good saddle an' bridle on that gray hoss," he added with apparent irrelevance.

"I don't want 'em," declared Laguerre.

"Me neither, but it seems kind of a pity to leave 'em there to be all chewed up. Them crows ain't done the leather a bit o' good already."

So Johnny, holding his breath, cut the cinches and throat latch and freed the bloated body of saddle and bridle.

He tossed the saddle into the convenient fork of a mountain ash.

"You'll nevair see eet again," observed Laguerre, eyeing his comrade curiously.

"I know, but they's silver conchas on that saddle an' bridle, an' real hand-carved leather. Yuh don't see that kind every day. Maybe they'll help to run down the rest o' the road agents. An' if the saddle is able to do us any good there she is safe in that ash fork where we can find her again."

"S'pose anudder man fin' her."

"Small loss. I know what she looks like. An' anyway I don't guess nobody 'll find her right soon. Yuh'll notice that twenty feet away them other branches an' trees hide her pretty complete."

"But w'at you do wit' de bridle dere on de ground?"

"That bridle's goin' to travel with me inside the slicker on the back of my saddle. That's right, laugh! You think you know it all, don't yuh? Well, you'll see where she's just a li'l thing like this bridle that'll maybe trip 'em all up."

CHAPTER XV

TARGET PRACTISE

RIDING with all care for the strength of their mounts—there might be desperate need of that strength later—they came at last to where the tall cone of Big Teepee Mountain rears its timberless top above the Yellow Medicine. Yet they did not swing north along the river. They had decided to visit the ranch of Bale Harper, and they held on due east toward the Medicine Mountains and Dry Creek. Dave Sinclair, in his mention of the ranch, had not definitely located the place. But the range of the Medicines is not more than a hundred miles long, and the flat country between the mountains and the creek, even at the widest of the stream's many loops, is a short five miles across.

In places the creek runs through the tangles of box-elder and sumac at the very base of the long slopes where the bull pine and the spruce grow in a sprawling confusion of clumps and patches. The Indians, those that are allowed off the reservation, shun the Medicine Mountains with a great enthusiasm. For, in their simple aboriginal way, they believe that the eternal sound of the wind as it grievously sighs and soughs through the pines that crowd the narrow cañons is the outward expression of the spirits of their ancestors. In common with more enlightened folk they greatly fear such spirits, especially when the sportive shades gambol and frolic among the tree-tops.

On a cool and blowy morning the two stray men saw the shallow waters of Dry Creek a-shine in the sunlight beyond the fringing cottonwoods. When they and their horses had drunk long and deep they rode northward between the mountains and the river.

Occasionally they saw cattle. The brand was B H. Several times they saw unbranded three-and-four-year-olds following their mothers.

"Looks like friend Bale was kind o' careless," observed Johnny. "That makes the ninth over two years old. Bull too, that one."

"De way de cow she sell now, dat mak hunder tirty—hunder forty dollar run roun' loose—not even de earmark."

"It'd be a pickup for some gent. Guess Dave spoke the truth when he said Bale didn't fuss round his ranch a whole lot. Still, yuh'd think he'd have a round-up once in a while."

The sun was high on the following day when they heard, beyond some cottonwoods standing above a thicket of box-elders, the sudden excited barking of a dog. They skirted the box-elders, rode through the cottonwoods, and saw across a flat a log ranch-house and stockaded corral backed by tall pines.

The flat was a long two hundred yards in width. In the middle of it a small yellow dog faced them with set legs and barked out his little soul in shrill fury. On a bench outside the door of the ranch-house a man sat and cleaned a Winchester. At least there was a rifle across his knees and he was industriously swabbing out the breech with a rag. The man eyed them steadily as they advanced and did not cease to swab.

"Shut up, Biscuit!" called the man on the bench.

Instantly the yellow dog ceased to shriek, loped to the

bench and sat down at the man's feet. Johnny waved a friendly arm. The man waved back, dropped his rag, clacked to the lever, and laid the Winchester across his knees. Johnny noted that he did not lower the hammer to safety. He wondered if there was a cartridge in the chamber. There are great possibilities in a man with a cocked rifle in his lap.

And now they were close enough to recognize the sharp-featured face in the dark shadow of the hat. Johnny's eyes widened. The man was Bale Harper's brother, Spill, he of the sandy hair and mean expression.

"Howdy," said Johnny gravely, stopping his horse in front of Harper.

"Howdy," returned the amiable Spill, his little eyes flickering between the faces of Johnny and Laguerre.

It was notable that Spill's nimble eyes never squarely encountered those of another. Their roving gaze was as elusive as a handful of smoke. Johnny, slouching sideways in the saddle, rolled a slow cigarette and silently and vainly strove to engage those quick and dodging eyes.

"Got a match, Harper?" he inquired gently.

"Shore," replied Spill, and took one from his hatband.

"Good layout yuh got here," observed Johnny, when the cigarette was going well.

"Yeah," was the indifferent reply.

"Bale's ranch, ain't it?" persisted Johnny.

"Mine an' his." Accompaniment of an elaborate yawn.

"We knowed yuh had a ranch over this way. We was hopin' to find it. Kind o' thought we'd spend one civilized night anyway."

"Yeah."

Johnny hurdled this without a stagger and kept right on.

"Seen any Flyin' M hosses around here?"

"No, I ain't!" Sharply.

"No offense," said Johnny mildly. "I was just wonderin'. Yuh see, we're scoutin' after a passel of our hosses. A whole heap of 'em has done strayed lately."

"Yeah." Further bored indifference on the part of Mr. Harper.

"Yeah," echoed Johnny, beginning to find the art of conversation a very boggy ford.

Sounded then the abrupt scuffle of boot soles on the floor of the ranch-house, and a lean and craggy person appeared in the doorway. He wore two black eyes, a scratched and puffy nose and a genial expression. In one hand was a chunk of bacon, in the other a butcher knife. Known among men as Skinny Devinney, he was numbered in the list of acquaintances of both Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Laguerre.

"Howdy, gents," cried the ex-station-boss heartily. "Light an' rest yore hats. Dinner's most ready. All I gotta do is slice off some more hawg. Bacon, can to-matters, coffee an' real shore-'nough sugar. Sounds good, huh?"

"Shore does, but——" Johnny looked pointed at the half-owner.

"Oh, that's all right," grinned Skinny Devinney. "He was just studyin' about askin' yuh. He's slow, Spill is. Takes him a while to cinch the hull on his mind. He don't mean nothin' by it, so don't yuh mind him none. He's a real two-legged man behind his face."

"Oh, I got a heart o' gold all right," said Spill Harper, with a snarl of a laugh. "Me'n that idjit there been a-fightin' all mornin', an' I ain't got over it yet. He says the best hosses come from Texas, an' any fool knows Ari-

zona has the call. Light, gents, throw yore hosses in the corral an' be miserable with the rest of us."

They "lighted" and ate with Skinny and Spill. After dinner all four sat on the bench outside the door and smoked and discussed the bleak news of the cow country. Among other incidents Johnny mentioned the robbing of the express office at Cutter. At the news the amazement of Mr. Harper and Mr. Devinney was profound and colourful with oaths.

"They're shore bluebirds," nodded Johnny.

"Yuh'd think they'd take a rest once in a while." said Skinny.

"They'll get dumped soon," declared Spill Harper. "They may be hellamile, but they can't keep it up. 'Tain't natural."

The logical Mr. Harper nodded his head sagely and looked about him for indorsement. Mr. Ramsay also looked about him. In an unobtrusive way he had been doing little else since his arrival. His lazy gray eyes rested for an instant on a cottonwood sapling two hundred yards distant, passed on to a few bullet-riddled tin cans in the foreground, then came back to the sapling. The trunk of the cottonwood was chipped and scarred and feathery with freshly splintered wood. Beyond it another sapling had been broken off some four feet from the ground. Stub and top were held together by a single strip of bark. Johnny's eyes as he looked became lazier.

"Been shootin' some," he drawled, nodding toward the two saplings.

"Nothin' much else to do when we ain't ridin'," explained Skinny.

"Well, I don't claim to be great shakes with a rifle,"

pursued Johnny, "but I got a good mind to try maybe a few shots."

"Help yoreself," invited Spill, his close-set little eyes beginning to gleam. "Maybe now me'n Skinny an' yore friend'll shoot with yuh."

"Not me," said Laguerre. "I weel not waste de cartridge."

Spill Harper and Skinny Devinney switched contemptuous eyes to the half-breed. They seemed to be on the point of saying something. But they switched their eyes away without saying it. And somehow the contempt in their eyes had disappeared. Laguerre smiled inwardly and rolled another cigarette.

Johnny, who had gone to the corral for the rifle on his saddle, came back with the long arm and sat down on the bench.

"See that cottonwood child there," he observed carelessly, "the one yuh've shot in two an' busted off. They's just a li'l strip o' bark a-holdin' it to the stub. Looks to be about as wide as yore thumb. I'm aimin' to cut her in two an' drop the trunk."

"Three shots?" asked Skinny Devinney.

"One," Johnny said gently.

"Bet yuh ten even yuh can't do it!" exclaimed Spill.

"Go yuh." Johnny took him up, and turned sleepy eyes on Skinny. "Anybody else want any of this? I got twenty more says I can cut that bark in two."

"Make it fifty," suggested Skinny, imbued with the gambler's spirit, and keen to make an honest dollar.

"I'm yore ladybug," Johnny told him.

"How about raisin' my ante?" Spill asked eagerly. "S'pose we make it same as Skinny's, huh?"

"So's they won't be any hard feelin's s'pose we do."

Gents, I will now give yuh an imitation of a young man puttin' one hundred wheels, five twenty-dollar gold babies of Uncle Sammy's money in the hands of a stakeholder, said office bein' ably filled by Mister Laguerre."

"I hope the money ain't imitation," smiled Skinny, as he made his ante, "'cause I've got mine spent already."

"Yuh'll owe that bartender a whole lot in less than five minutes," Johnny assured him. "Watch my smoke."

"We will," sneered Spill Harper. "Here's mine, Mister Laguerre. Not that she's really necessary, 'cause yuh'll be handin' her back with somethin' added on before a great while."

"Yeah," laughed Johnny. "In some ways you an' Mister Devinney think a lot alike. You just watch my smoke. Watch the professor take the rabbits out o' grandpa's hat. Look closely, Ferdinand, or yuh'll miss somethin'. See the professor has ab-so-lutely nothin' up his sleeve but his arm. Watch now, you folks in the front row, an' yuh'll learn all about how to make one hundred dollars in three movements an' a hatful o' smoke."

Johnny tossed up his Winchester. There was a flash and a bang and a cloud of gray smoke. The strip of bark parted. The heel of the sapling's severed top scraped down the side of the stub.

Johnny ejected the empty shell, clicked in a fresh cartridge, lowered the hammer to safety and looked inquiringly at Skinny and Spill.

"That wasn't a shot," said Skinny with an uncertain laugh; "that was a miracle."

"Was it?" grinned Johnny.

"Yuh couldn't do it again!" Spill declared emphatically.

"No? Well, we'll see about that later. Just now,

there's a li'l business to talk over. You gents are satisfied I done what I said I would?"

"Oh, take the money!" snapped the sulky Harper.

"Yo're welcome to mine, an' that's whatever," Skinny put in tardily. "Miracle or no miracle, that was shorely one in the black."

"It don't hardly seem right to take this without givin' you gents a chance to come again," Johnny averred, pocketing the clinking handful of gold. "S'pose now you fellers try a shot or two."

"I can't shoot with you," Skinny said, strangely modest, "but Spill here's most as good as his brother, an' Bale he's a medicine man with a rifle."

"Aw, I ain't nothin' like Bale," grunted Spill, "but I'll get my rifle if you want. Get yores, Skinny. Maybe Mister Laguerre would like to make it four-handed."

"Meestair Laguerre ees plenty satisfy for watch de sharpshootair." Thus Laguerre. "But," he added with a sinister smile, "jus' for show you, I weel was'e de cartridge."

The half-breed pulled his gun without haste and rolled the cylinder. It was his habit, as it is the habit of any thoughtful man, to carry the hammer on an empty chamber. He drew a cartridge from his belt and filled that empty chamber. He cocked the six-shooter and shifted sidewise on the bench.

"See dat stone," he remarked softly, nodding toward a large white pebble twenty yards distant.

The gun, apparently held with great carelessness in the half-breed's lap, cracked sharply. The white pebble jerked upward and danced along the ground. *Crack!* Again that spasmodic leap and skipping roll. Four times more the half-breed fired, and every time the white pebble

jumped and hopped under the sting of those accurate bullets.

Laguerre calmly turned out his cylinder, prodded forth the empties, and reloaded.

"I learn dat treeck w'en I was seeck un have plenty tam," he explained. "You do eet, mabbeso?"

The smile with which he accompanied these words was not sinister. It was chilling.

"I guess likely," said Skinny, his eyes wide with wonder at what he had just seen. "I guess I will—not. What yuh tryin' to do, make us jealous? By Gawd, if I ever get mad at you I ain't a-goin' to tell you about it while you an' me are inhabitin' the same county. I guess maybe now I'd better write you a letter an' play safe complete. Spill, I'm tellin' yuh, I used to think I knowed somethin' about guns an' rifles an' such, but I'm free to admit that the last five minutes has been a liberal education with trimmin's. C'mon, Spill, an' le's take our licker like li'l men. We'll die game anyhow."

Johnny knew that Spill's rifle was a forty-five ninety. During the meal he had noticed two other rifles leaning together in a corner of the room. One was the same size as Spill's, but the other was smaller. It was either a thirty-eight or forty sixty-five. Johnny yearned to lay hands upon it, but one may not shatter etiquette and arouse suspicion so far as to paw another man's weapon. One must resort to strategy and duplicity.

When Skinny appeared with his rifle it was, as Johnny had expected—bread always falls on the buttered side—the other forty-five ninety. So he shot a dozen rounds with the two men while Laguerre watched sleepily. But the astute Johnny did not out-shoot his rivals by more than a narrow margin. It would not do to beat them too

handily. He knew that they believed his first shot to be more or less of an accident, and he was content that they should so believe. He endeavoured to place another bet with them, but their belief was not quite strong enough for that and they refused.

"Tell yuh what," Johnny said suddenly, "let's try another way. We've done our li'l shootin' at that sardine can, an' Harper an' me are about tied."

"Yes, you are!" cried Skinny Devinney. "I've got to admit I can't shoot for shucks alongside you two, but you've outshot Spill forty ways, Ramsay."

"I ain't so shore," denied Spill uglily.

"Listen here to my idea," Johnny said smoothly. "I've been usin' my own rifle right along. Bein' used to it helps a lot."

"Why shouldn't yuh use yore own rifle?" queried the puzzled Skinny.

"No reason a-tall. But I seen a thirty-eight inside. Lemme use that, an' gimme three sightin' shots—it's only fair I'd oughta know if she throws off—an' I'll go yuh a hundred or two hundred if yuh like over six hundred yards at any ol' target."

Spill looked at Skinny and winked. As every one knows, a weapon with which one is unfamiliar does not make for accuracy.

"I'll go yuh," said Skinny briefly, and hurried into the house.

He returned with the smallest of the three rifles and handed it to Johnny.

"She ain't a thirty-eight like you said," he told Johnny. "She's a forty sixty-five."

"Oh yeah, a forty sixty-five."

Johnny took the gun into his hand and weighed it spec-

ulatively. He slewed it round and worked the lever with his usual uncanny speed. A stream of yellow dragonflies, the cartridges rocketed over his shoulder.

"Want to see how she works," he explained to the watching three, and stooped to retrieve the scattered cartridges.

He was a little slow in filling the magazine. There seemed to be a certain difficulty in pushing the shells through the loading-gate.

"Got any more shells?" he asked, looking at Skinny. "They's only seven here."

"Seven's more'n enough," protested Spill, but the obliging Skinny reëntered the house and came out with a fat handful of cartridges and tossed the lot across to Johnny, who had removed himself several yards from the doorsill.

"There's eight more," observed Skinny. "'At's all we got."

"Oh, I guess I ain't goin' to need 'em all," Johnny said and proceeded to make it a full magazine.

He had six cartridges left over, and slipped one into the barrel. The remaining five he dropped into a pocket of his chaps.

"All right," remarked Johnny, sliding his hand into his pocket and briskly clinking the five cartridges. "All right, what are we a-goin' to shoot at?"

"Y'ain't taken yore sightin' shots yet," Spill grunted sourly.

"I'll shore take 'em if yuh say so," smiled Johnny.

At varying ranges he fired three shots at as many cottonwoods. He levered in a fresh cartridge, put the hammer on safety and executed a *pas seul*. His sliding toe struck one of the spent shells and kicked it under the bench.

Just then Biscuit, who had absented himself on some business of his own, sidled round the corner of the house.

"Hiyah feller!" called Johnny, stooping and picking up another of the empties at his feet. "Bone, feller, bone!"

He flipped the spent shell whirling toward the yellow dog. But his aim was poor and the brass cylinder struck six feet ahead of the dog and rolled under the bulge of the foundation log of the ranch-house. Biscuit sniffed at the cartridge case, sneezed, then sat down on lean haunches and meditatively scratched himself.

It is not necessary to relate in detail how Johnny in three shots at six hundred yards amazed beyond measure Skinny and Spill and won another hundred dollars. Let it suffice that he did this, and with an air positively apologetic in its mildness returned the forty sixty-five Winchester to Skinny.

"The magazine's full," said Johnny. "I put in three of the five shells I had in my pocket. Here's the other two."

CHAPTER XVI

THE AGENCY

TEEPEE MOUNTAIN on Hatchet Creek is almost the twin of Big Teepee on the Yellow Medicine in everything but name. It stands among lesser hills thirty miles north of Paradise Bend. Twenty miles beyond the Teepee, at the junction of the Hatchet and Little Knife creeks, sprawls Johnson's Peak. High, wide and bare, unlovely as rockslides and deep gulches can make it, the base of the great peak covers more ground than several townships. The northern slopes marked the southern boundary of the Fort Yardley Indian Reservation.

The post itself lay along the banks of the Little Knife, and the Indian agent lived trustfully at the agency in the middle of the reservation. And the reservation was—it has been plowed and harrowed by the settler these sixteen years—fifty miles across at the narrowest part. But Indian agents in those days were not supposed to have nerves.

In order to locate a certain Indian, it was necessary, for the redskin is a restless soul, to call upon the agent. Sometimes he knew where to find the desired Indian, more often he did not, but he could at least pass one on to the Indian police who always knew.

So it was that Johnny and Laguerre, their ponies adrip from the ford of the Little Knife, rode into the post of Fort Yardley at guard-mount. The guard was at parade

rest as the two punchers trotted up the trail. Which trail crossed the end of the parade. The adjutant gave the command—:

“Sound off!”

The field music, six fifers and four drummers, immediately swung out to pass in front of the officers of the guard to the left of the line. As they swung the fifes and drums shrilled and crashed into “Yankee Doodle.”

At the horrific and unexpected racket both cow-ponies went out of their heads. They sprang into the air, came down stiff-legged, and then proceeded, in long bucking leaps to travel across the parade ground. Johnny’s horse in its frantic terror charged down upon a major, two captains, and half-a-dozen lieutenants who were peaceably watching guard-mount from the boardwalk in front of the C. O.’s. They stood their ground like officers and gentlemen till it was evident that the horse had no intention of stopping. Whereupon they retreated rapidly in several directions.

Johnny, hot and angry, swearing for that he had lost his hat, adopted extreme measures just as his mount’s forehoofs pounded on the boardwalk. He gave two terrific right and left yanks at the horse’s mouth to the inevitable end that the animal crossed its forelegs and stood on its neck. Johnny did not stop going. He landed on his face in Mrs. C. O.’s pet flower bed. He bounced to his feet, all fresh dirt and crushed pansies, and caught his horse by the bit in time to prevent that nimble quadruped, which had regained its feet with remarkable celerity, from trespassing upon the sacred precincts of the C. O.’s porch.

“Hell’s bells!” panted Johnny swinging at the head of his capering horse. “Whatsa matter with yuh, yuh goggle eyed accordeen? This ain’t no dance!”

But, as the fifes and drums continued to rattle and squeak on their way back to the right of the line, the horse appeared to think it was a dance, and there was bedlam and hullabaloo on that boardwalk.

Finally the field music ceased playing, to the disgust of every one save the sweating Johnny. When the music stopped the horse did too. Johnny, muttering many words, raised scowling eyes to the row of grinning faces on the C. O.'s porch. His glance, caught by a movement in their rear, swept past them to the front door. There stood the tall and dignified C. O. The officer stared balefully at Johnny. But the puncher remained unimpressed. He was not a soldier, so he winked pleasantly at the C. O. and gazed with much interest at the face of the man looking over the C. O.'s shoulder.

The man was the red-head, and he had, as Johnny met his eyes, made a sudden movement as if to dodge out of sight. The puncher wondered why. He also wondered why the red-head should call upon the commanding officer at Fort Yardley. What could a colonel of regulars have in common with such a man? And then Johnny remembered that for all he himself knew to the contrary the yellow-eyed red-head was as pure as any number of square miles of freshly fallen snow. Johnny nodded to the red-head, hopped into the saddle and rode back across the parade for his hat.

He joined Laguerre, who had contrived to stop his horse by the simple expedient of steering the animal into the log wall of the quartermaster's storehouse, and they rode away together.

"That red-headed jigger's here," Johnny told the half-breed. "I seen him at the colonel's house. Inside he was, standin' right behind the colonel all comfortable an serene.

I flapped my ears at him an' he flapped back, but I don't guess he was awful glad to see me. He looked like he wanted to dodge, but wasn't quick enough."

"Funny ting she ees here, dat red-head," puzzled Laguerre.

"She's worse'n that. We needn't bother about goin' to see the agent now. If he's what we think he is he'll shore trail us an' find out our business. Oh, yeah, lookin' for what became o' Black Bear's dun mare. Then good-by Mister Red-head, an' what he knows will go to the right place an' you an' me will be all tangled up in our rope. Are you me?"

"I am you all right. But we mus' do somet'ing. We mus' go to de agen' un tell heem de long lie. We mus' have de *raison* for come here to de reservation. Den de red-head weel be satisfy we are not trailin' de hold-up. She ees smart, dat *m'sieu'*."

"So are we smart. An' you leave the lyin' to me. I'll think up a real fancy one. An' another thing, we'd oughta hang round an' find out when the red-head goes to the agency an' what happens an' all like that. But, s'pose he don't go?"

"She weel go, by gar," was the confident assurance of Laguerre. "Eet weel be de job for fin' Black Bear now. We cannot ask even de police. Dey might tell. *Sacre nom de Dieu!* — de luck!"

"Don't yuh know any of these Injuns here, Telescope?"

"De only Enjun w'at belong here I know ees Willie's Ol' Brudder-een-Law, un she ees off de reservation down on de Lazy."

"Lot o' good that'll do us. We just gotta do the best we can then, an' keep Mister High Pockets Red-Head breathin' easy about us. Yessir, Telescope, he mustn't

get to takin' us serious, not for a minute. I'm tellin' yuh all he needs is one li'l suspicion for him to paint for war prompt an' right away, an' a battle with that gent means him lyin' all so free an' comfortable behind an outcrop or a tree an' you an' me wanderin' into sight round a bend in the trail all ready to be plugged. An' I'm free to admit this here trip of ours to Fort Yardley is a heap likely to strain his good nature a few an' set his imagination to turnin' flip-flops. An' yuh gotta admit the reservation is a mile or two out o' the way for Flyin' M stray men."

"I see dat all right, un s'posin' we mak de leetle trap for dat man, Johnny?"

"Not a-tall," Johnny said hastily, instantly divining the fell purpose at the bottom of Laguerre's "leetle trap."

"Yuh see, Telescope, this has all gotta be a heap legal. An' she wouldn't be right to go to quarrelin' with the red-head yet. We gotta wait."

"S'pose now she don' wait? S'pose now she go to for bushw'ack us?" Laguerre turned ominous eyes on Johnny.

"Well?"

"I tink eet be good t'ing for bushw'ack heem firs', mab-beso."

"Is that yore li'l plan?" Johnny exclaimed, precisely as if he had not from the first correctly fathomed the half-breed's thoughts. "Why, Telescope, I'm shore surprised at yuh. Yuh shore won't get no white card at Sunday-school next week."

"Aw ——!" grunted Telescope. "You ees jus' lak Tom Loudon we'n heem un me was trail dat Blakeley gang. By gar, Beel Archer un a frien' hees was foller Tom un me out o' Marysville, un Tom was raise—— w'en I wan' for bushw'ack dem. Well, we do not bushw'ack dem, un dey mak us plenty trouble aftair. More better

we bushw'ack dem at firs'—ah, we weel not talk about eet. We weel let de red-head go—dees tam. But she have keel' Mat Neville, un nobody was cry eef de red-head she was keel."

"We gotta be legal about it, I tell yuh."

"You be too —— legal un you die queeck, *bien sûr*."

"This hold-up huntin' shore ain't a safe business, is it, Telescope?" grinned Johnny Ramsay.

To which frivolity Laguerre made reply by repeating that the red-head's calling upon the Fort Yardley C. O. was an odd chance. Johnny made no comment, and conversation languished while the ponies' steady walk-along ate the long miles down.

When now and then they topped the long and sunbaked ridges they looked back over the way they had come. But they saw no moving speck on the back trail betokening a following rider. They did not turn aside to lie in wait and spy patiently. For the man might well be a trailer. In which case it was necessary that their pony tracks lead without deviation to the agency.

Johnny and Laguerre reached the agency in the early afternoon. They had met no Indians on their journey and none was in sight among the gray-brown buildings. The agent, an old-young man with bored eyes, was sitting on his porch gloomily reading a month-old newspaper. At their coming he folded the paper carefully and stuck it in his hip pocket, for a paper is a precious thing and may, when the printing has been read, be used for cigarettes.

Some Indian agents are oppressed with the importance of their stations, but this agent was a human being and lonely. He welcomed the two riders to the shade of his porch and the comfort of his barrel-chairs and proffered refreshment.

"Water pail's right inside the door," said the agent. "Watering trough's 'round the corner of the house."

So, being horsemen, they first attended to their thirsty mounts, then came back and drank three dipperfuls apiece and joined the agent on the porch.

"Well," said the agent, when the length and dust of the trail had been commented upon, "well, what's the trouble?"

"Trouble?" Johnny raised his eyebrows.

"Of course, trouble." The bored eyes lifted wearily. "What have my Indians been doing?"

Johnny had devised a most excellent lie for the good of the agent, but the latter's remark threw that lie into the discard and substituted another, equally excellent.

"I dunno," said Johnny, "but we've got a sneakin' notion they've maybe been runnin' off our hosses."

"I know," nodded the agent sympathetically. "They will do it. They're like children."

"Yeah, but spankin' won't do 'em no good. We think them hosses are on this reservation now."

"What brand?"

"Flyin' M. Here's a letter tellin' what we are."

"Why, that's Scotty Mackenzie's outfit, down on the Dogsoldier," said the agent, his eyes skimming the lines of writing.

"Shore, an' she's from Scotty Mackenzie's ranch the hosses have been took."

"How many?"

"We've missed eight," lied Johnny.

"Willie's Old Brother-in-Law and his family are the only ones out on pass." The agent was thinking aloud.

"Tain't him—not by no manner of means." Johnny was thoroughly determined to absolve once for all that

much-respected redskin, Willie's Old Brother-in-Law. "For one thing that Injun is down on the Lazy, an' for another he's a personal friend of yore's truly, an' for another he wouldn't rustle no hosses nohow. No sir, they's been Injuns seen near the ranch, an' right after they was seen the hosses was missed. Of course, I don't say yore Injuns done it, but they's a chance."

"You may be right," sighed the agent, "But my Indians, most of them, range north and west as a rule. However, the only thing to do is to look around."

"My idea exactly. We thought we'd come to you first—maybe yuh could help us."

"I can't, except to send a policeman with you. And let me impress upon you if you find these horses there must be no violence. Horses and suspects must be brought by the policeman before me and I will judge the case."

"Fine," said Johnny. "We won't do nothin' illegal. We aim to please. But we shore want them horses."

"Of course. I'll send for a policeman at once."

This was rushing matters much too speedily to suit Johnny. He had been talking for time, lots of time, the more time the better. And now the agent spoke of a policeman. But Johnny was not at a loss. He made a grimace and rubbed his stomach.

"Guess I musta drank too much o' that water," he muttered.

"What's that?" asked the agent.

"Bellyache," was the jejune reply.

"Dat watair she was too col' mabbeso," suggested La-guerre, who had caught the significance of a dropped eyelid.

"And you probably didn't stop to make coffee at noon, if you stopped at all," said the agent.

"We didn't," groaned Johnny, entering into the spirit of the moment.

"I thought so. Stomach's had nothing to do all day, and you pour a quart of cold water in it. You sit here. I'll fix you up."

The agent went indoors, and Johnny gave himself up to his acting and to pleasant thoughts of a small and invigorating drink of whisky. The private stock of the Indian agent was reputed to be aged, mellow, and potent to a degree. The agent returned with a thick and brimming tumbler. A pleasant glow of anticipation warmed Johnny's whole being. He almost smiled, but remembered himself in time to make a face and hug his stomach.

"Drink this," said the agent kindly.

Johnny held out a trembling hand, took the glass, and gulped down a large and healthy swallow. Then, well nigh strangling, tears starting from his eyes, he sprang to his feet with a cough and a splutter, and clung to one of the porch uprights. His outraged throat burned. The roof of his mouth and his tongue seemed on fire.

"You only took a little bit," said the agent reprovingly, as he stopped to pick up the fallen glass. "I don't believe it was enough to help your colic."

"Wha—what is that stuff?" gasped Johnny.

"Jamaica ginger," the agent told him. "You seemed in such pain that I made it a little stronger than usual."

"She's great stuff," Johnny said without enthusiasm. "Bet my tongue's raw."

He hung the organ in question out of his mouth and waggled it in the open air. Laguerre choked in an odd way and slid hurriedly round the corner of the house. Johnny followed him with angry eyes. He could see noth-

ing to laugh at. He was suffering the preliminary tortures of the damned.

"I'll get you some more," said the agent, who had been watching him closely. "I'll have that colic cured in no time."

"Never mind," was Johnny's hasty injunction. "I feel better already. I—I'll just sit down a li'l while, I guess. That's all I need now. I'll be right in two shakes."

But Johnny spoke to empty air. He heard indoors the clink of bottle neck on tumbler rim.

"Wish I'd chose to fall off the porch an' sprain my ankle instead," he groaned to himself. "That ginger stuff would shore do a lot more good rubbed on than swallowed. Bet he made a mistake and gimme hoss-liniment anyway," he added morosely.

The agent appeared and pressed on Johnny a fresh tumblerful of colic's first aid. In vain did Johnny affirm upon oath that the pain had almost entirely departed. The agent was an unbelieving citizen.

"Drink it right down," the agent insisted in a tone that was meant to be soothing. "Swallow it quickly. The first glass seemed to bother you a little, so I made this a trifle weaker. Come, come, man, what's the matter with you? This is the best thing in the world for what ails you."

Mentally anathematizing the agent for a liar Johnny drank the awful draft, clamped his jaws, and slumped down on the small of his back in complete bitterness of soul.

"You'll do finely now," the agent assured him, "but if you don't I'll mix you another in jig time."

"Not while I have my health you won't," muttered Johnny.

"What's that?" The agent spoke from the doorway.

"I was just sayin' how the last dose shore stampeded that bellyache," Johnny cried hastily. Li'l ol' tummy's shore listenin' to reason now, yuh bet yuh."

Laguerre silently drifted up and sat down on the edge of the porch. He settled an upright comfortably between his shoulder-blades and placidly fished out the makings. Johnny ached to grab Laguerre by his self-satisfied ankles and pull him off the porch. What right had he to sit there and blandly enjoy himself smoking cigarettes while his—Johnny's—little insides were causing their possessor acutest agony?

Johnny wondered dismally whether he himself would ever be able to smoke. It seemed doubtful. The world was a dark place, full of woe and tribulation. A moving speck on the Fort Yardley trail hardly served to rouse Johnny's interest in life and its work.

An hour later the moving speck had resolved itself into a horse and rider. The animal was blue. The horseman wore a high-crowned white hat.

"S'pose we might as well be movin'," the unhappy Johnny grunted to the agent.

"Sure you're able?" With maddening solicitude.

"Shore." Ungraciously.

"I'll get a policeman."

The agent stepped off the porch and crossed to one of the other buildings.

"How you feel?" Laguerre asked gravely.

"Like ——!"

Laguerre looked across the baked and shimmering landscape and winked his off eye at Johnson's Peak.

When the agent returned with an Indian policeman in tow the blue horse and its white-hatted rider were racking

in between the agency buildings. The horseman dismounted in front of the agency and trailed his reins. He stuck one foot on the edge of the porch and let his blank yellow stare travel from Laguerre to Johnny.

"Beats all how I'm forever meetin' you gents," he remarked smilelessly.

"Don't it," Johnny said gravely.

"Shore does," nodded the red-head. "Almost seems as 'if we'd ought to get acquainted—or somethin'."

Came then that odd and dog-toothed smile that carried no joy whatever and lifted the left side of the man's upper lip. Johnny chuckled as a man chuckles at a most excellent joke.

"Does seem like we'd ought—or somethin'," he drawled.

The red-head watched them silently as they mounted and rode away with the Indian policeman.

CHAPTER XVII

THE INEXPLICABLE RED-HEAD

THE two stray men won the good will of the Indian policeman with tobacco and a very good jack-knife. He was a Piegan, this policeman, and it developed that Laguerre had at one time married a Piegan girl. Which fact made the Indian almost a blood brother.

Nevertheless neither the half-breed nor Johnny was in the least loose in his talk. They spoke casually and with great caution of many things other than Black Bear and his dun mare. But in camp that evening the conversation was turned by Laguerre on horses. Like most Indians, the policeman knew a horse from tail to foretop. It seemed most natural as the discussion progressed for Johnny to assert that there were many horses that could not be broken to stand to the trailing rein, and that a gelding was easier than a mare to break.

The policeman concurred warmly. He had a friend, he said, one Black Bear, who had once owned a dun mare that would not stand without being tied, pulled back on the rope, was incredibly vicious in the biting and kicking line, bucked like a pinwheel twice a week regularly, but that could be ridden down to a whisper without giving out.

"By Gawd," swore the policeman, "dat mare she go forever all same fire hoss on de reload. She mak you tire 'fore she tire."

"Yeah," Johnny said with interest. "Yore friend got her now?"

"Naw, sol' her." Disgustedly.

"Who to?"

"Dat man wit' de red head un blue hoss wat come to de agency 'fore we go 'way," was the sufficiently unexpected reply.

"Him," Johnny almost stuttered. Then to cover his surprise, he added. "He ain't ridin' her now."

"Naw. Ride de blue pony now."

"Guess he must be in the hoss business."

"I dunno."

"Don't he come here often, huh?"

"Naw, she no come of'en. Come w'en she buy de mare. Come to-day. Two tam, mabbeso."

"Funny I can't remember his name. What did he say it was, Telescope?" Johnny turned toward the half-breed.

Laguerre shook his head and looked inquiringly at the policeman.

"Never know hees name. She no tell Black Bear. Black Bear no giveadam. Hees money good, un dat ees all Black Bear wan' for know."

Since the information they had been seeking was now theirs, it was unnecessary to see Black Bear, but it was necessary to maintain their bluff of "rustled horses." So they spent the next day riding hither and yon with their friend the Indian policeman. They looked at many horses but they had covered only a small section of the reservation when, in the afternoon of the third day, they announced their intention of returning to the agency.

"Guess our hosses ain't here, after all," remarked Johnny, with a fine air of regret. "No use a-combn' the whole reservation."

"Dey a 'ole ban' o' pony over dem heel—mabbeso you fin' you hoss," suggested the policeman hopefully, for the horse-band over the hill belonged to a wealthy enemy of his and he—the policeman—was humanly desirous of seeing the mighty brought low.

But the horse-band was allowed to graze in peace and the policeman, mentally lamenting the lack of enterprise displayed by the two stray men, was compelled to return with them to the agency.

They reached the huddle of low buildings in the last of the twilight, and, by the light of the lantern hanging on a nail beside the agent's door, they saw on the floor of the agent's porch, seven neat McClellan saddles lying all along.

As they dismounted, a soldier strolled round the corner of the house and halted at sight of them. The lantern light shone dully yellow on the three faded stripes marking the blue sleeves. The "non-com" faced about and walked quickly in the direction of the corrals. They could hear him calling for Mack, Thomas, and Goff. Somewhat more than vaguely uneasy, Johnny stepped up on the porch. The agent came to the open doorway.

"Hello," said the agent cordially. "I was wondering when you'd drift in. Any luck?—Too bad. Never mind. Maybe I'll run across 'em. Come in, come in, both of you. Yellow Bird"—to the Indian policeman—"take the horses to the corrals and tell Boom Kettle to feed them."

The agent led the way through the dark front room to a blanketed doorway outlined by narrow lines of light. He pulled aside the heavy blanket, letting out a golden glow of radiance, and signed for them to enter.

They passed in, their eyes slitted against the dazzle of the two round-wicked lamps on the table in the middle of the room.

Facing them, his elbows on the table, sat an officer. His shoulder-straps bore the gold oak-leaves on yellow of a cavalry major, his body was lean, and his face was round, moon-round, and burned red as a brick. The eyes he raised at their entrance were a hard black, and there was nothing moony about them. You often see judge-advocates with just such eyes. The major nodded jerkily, and Johnny and Laguerre nodded back, and wondered what on earth he wanted and why the agent was fidgeting in the background.

"Sit down," said the major. "I want to ask you a few questions."

"Help yoreself," smiled Johnny. "We aim to please."

He hooked a chair forward, slid into it sidewise, and pushed his hat back. He brought out the makings and proceeded to build himself a cigarette. Far be it from him to be either impressed or intimidated by the military. He blew a ring and looked through it at the moon-faced major. Laguerre, slumping comfortably down on his shoulder-blades, smiled an untender smile. He foresaw a jape.

"You two are from Paradise Bend, aren't you?" asked the major.

"Us?" Johnny quirked a surprised eyebrow. "Oh, no, we ain't from the Bend."

"I was told differently." Thus the major severely.

"Yo're apt to hear most anythin' in this country," Johnny's grin did not quite take the curse off the impertinence.

"You'd better tell me what I wish to know," cautioned the major.

"If I only knowed what it was yuh wanted," Johnny suggested gently.

"Who and what are you two men?" The major's tone was that of one addressing a squadron.

"Wrong," declared Johnny. "Wrong twice. We ain't over in the next county, an' we ain't 'what,' not for a minute."

Laguerre began to eye the major with extreme disfavour. The half-breed knew that there was a soldier standing on the porch. He had heard the scrape of a carbine butt and the jingle of spurs.

The major, omitting the "what," repeated his question. Johnny promptly gave the required information.

"How do I know you are telling the truth?" the major inquired with mistaken keenness, and now Johnny perceived what he had not at first, that the hard black eyes of the major were set a little too close together.

"How do yuh know I'm tellin' the truth?" Johnny cooed softly as a sucking dove. "Y'ain't been west o' the Mississippi long, or yuh'd just naturally know I was tellin' the truth. I dunno but what the colonel would 'a' done better to send along a shavetail—if he's got one with brains."

The barbed rebuke stuck and clung. The major was not exactly a fool. But even as Johnny had divined, he was not long from the East and a New England post where an examining officer might say pretty much what he liked. Some day sense of proportion would be his, but it was decidedly not now. The brick-red of his countenance deepened a shade. The black eyes turned spiteful.

"Now, now, steady," Johnny advised earnestly. "You ain't doin' what the colonel told you to do. 'Find out all yuh can about 'em,' says he, 'an' treat 'em right.' Ain't that correct? Well, don't answer if it hurts yuh. Good old feller, the colonel. I seen him this mornin'.

He's got a nice, kind face, but I'm afraid he believes everythin' that's told him."

Johnny shook his head and sighed. It was evident that he was grieving over the trusting nature of the Fort Yardley C. O. Laguerre snickered openly. From the porch came a sound midway between a cough and a snort.

"I believe I'll put you under arrest," said the major.

"No, you won't," Johnny informed him decidedly. "Yore orders don't say nothin' like that."

"How do you know?"

"Easy. You got one buck out there on the porch. I heard him scuffin' round. If more o' yore boys had come up on the porch or surrounded the house, then I might 'a' thought somethin'. But nothin' like that. The other five are down at the corrals. One's doin' sentry over yore horses, an' the sergeant, with three to help him, is goin' through the warbags on our saddles."

The major started up in his chair and rapped out a sharp oath.

"Yuh see," continued Johnny, "they've got a lantern an' I can see 'em right plain through the window behind yuh. An' another thing, if yuh don't want a feller to know how few men yuh got, don't leave yore saddles all out in plain sight on the porch for anybody to count. But don't yuh care," he added kindly. "Everybody makes mistakes—at first."

The major was understood to damn the West and all its Westerners.

"Now, look here," said Johnny, "I know yore feelin's are saddle-galled somethin' terrific, but you rub salve on 'em an' listen to Li'l Willie an' stop cussin' so a gent can get a word in edgeways. S'pose you don't walk in the water so much. S'pose you tell us just what yo're after.

We're good fellers, an' helpin' out the Army is right where we live."

"I believe you're a pair of scoundrels," the major said uncertainly.

Laguerre's brows drew together, but Johnny Ramsay merely laughed.

"We're worse than that," he averred, and laughed again. "But we don't go snoopin' through other folks' belongin's."

"It was necessary," the major declared gruffly.

"Yuh mean you thought it was. Loosen up, can't yuh, an' tell us what yo're suspectin' us of? Here, read this. It'll prove what I've been tellin' yuh. Guess I'd ought to showed it to yuh sooner."

He handed Scotty's letter to the major. The latter read it carefully, and handed it back to Johnny.

"Of course, it could be a forgery," grumbled the major.

"Of course she could, an' yuh might be a masquerade yore own self!" barked the indignant Johnny. "How do we know yo're what yuh claim to be? Yuh might be a lightnin'-rod agent, for all we can tell."

"Now, now, no recriminations, please," soothed the agent, stepping forward to the table. "I told you, Major, that these men carried a letter from their employer, and that I knew they were what they claimed to be. I tell you quite frankly that I think you're making a mess of it and that the colonel will not be pleased."

The close-set black eyes of the moon-faced major stared angrily up into the bored ones of the Indian agent.

"This matter requires a certain delicacy of treatment, as it were," the agent went on suavely, "and you, Major, are a trifle too direct. Better let me do it."

"Oh, very well," snarled the major. "Have it your own way."

He rose, kicked back his chair with unnecessary violence, and stalked thumpingly from the room. The agent sat down on the edge of the table, stuck his hands into his pockets, and smiled at the two ruffled stray men.

"Mustn't mind the major," he remarked. "He means well, and all that sort of thing, but he will try to browbeat people, and that doesn't work—ever. I'm afraid," he added, "that the major has a suspicious nature."

"Oh, no, not a-tall," grinned Johnny, his good humour completely restored.

"There have been quite a few robberies and murders in Sunset and Fort Creek counties lately," observed the agent suddenly serious. "I understand that all these crimes are supposed to have been committed by the same gang, and that the gang is a large one. Am I right?"

"S'posin' an' knowin' are two different horses."

"You don't know anything definite about the gang, then?"

"Nobody, in the Territory—exceptin' the gang—does, I guess."

"Well, I'd hoped that you might be able to tell me something. You see, within two or three weeks the Army paymaster will arrive at Fort Yardley. The troops will have a three-months pay-day—forty or fifty thousand dollars. And that amount of money is not to be sneezed at by any band of outlaws. The colonel has been warned that the bandits are planning to attack the paymaster and his escort somewhere between Damson—where he will leave the railroad—and the fort. So, knowing that you two came from the vicinity of the Bend, the colonel thought you might be able to give us a little information concerning these robbers."

"Did the colonel expect to find the information in our warbags?" inquired Johnny.

The agent's cheeks reddened.

"That was the major's idea," he declared warmly. "I advised against it. I'm afraid the major came prepared to dislike you."

"He still does," supplemented Johnny. Then he asked curiously, "When was the colonel warned o' this hold-up?"

"Two or three days ago."

"Would yuh mind tellin' who warned him?"

"It was that red-headed man—the one who arrived here as you were leaving with Yellow Bird. Says his name's Camp, Barry Camp."

"The red-head! Him?"

"You seem surprised," said the agent with a sharp look. "Why shouldn't it be he?"

"No reason a-tall," Johnny replied hastily. "Kind o' funny-lookin' jigger, ain't he?"

"Hm-m-m."

The agent pursed his lips and stared steadily at Johnny. After a moment he nodded as if in answer to a self-asked question, and locked long-fingered hands behind his head.

"Tell me what you know about him," he said quietly.

"I don't know nothin'—much," drawled Johnny, and gave the agent a brief account of the killing of Mat Neville.

Of his own surmises concerning the red-head he made no mention.

"Quick on the trigger, eh?" was the agent's comment on the tale. "He looks the part. I don't like him. He has the face of a criminal. He's been on the reservation before once. Bought a horse, I think. He's greatly interested in you two and your doings."

"Is he?" The eyes of Johnny shifted sidewise and met those of Laguerre.

"You'd think so," the agent said. "After you'd gone away with Yellow Bird, he tried to pump me about you. I'll admit he was clever enough. No open questioning or anything like that. But I knew what he was trying to do. I haven't lived with the wily Indian all these years for nothing. He got small satisfaction, I'm afraid. I don't lead well."

"Maybe it would 'a' been just as well if yuh'd led better—this time," remarked Johnny.

"So that's it," chuckled the agent. "Well, I didn't know, and I don't know anything—much."

"What I meant was that we don't care if the red-head did know we was after some rustled hosses," Johnny explained smoothly. "He ain't our idea of somethin' to be afraid of."

"Exactly," agreed the agent. "You're a man of discernment. On certain subjects I believe we think alike. I hope we do."

"Why yeah," said Johnny. "I ain't none shore what yo're whirlin' yore loop at, but help yoreself."

"My estimate of your character is more firmly based then ever," chuckled the agent. "—— the luck! If it hadn't been for the major I'm sure you'd have talked to some purpose. That's all right. Look as innocent as you please."

"Well, I didn't steal the chicken," grinned Johnny, who was rapidly losing his initial dislike for the agent. "An' I don't like white meat a li'l bit, but would yuh mind tellin' me whether our red-headed friend was the one put the colonel up to investigatin' our records?"

"You wrong the red-head. He cast no suspicion on

you. Indeed, so positive was he in his statements that your probity was all that it should be that the colonel began to think you were too good to be true. Hence the major and his rough-hewn tongue."

Johnny shook a helpless head. Laguerre looked up at the ceiling and scratched his left ear.

"I dunno what's the matter with that red-head," Johnny said slowly. "He dunno us except to say 'Howdy,' he ain't got no special call to love us, an' he don't owe us a sou marquee. Whyfor should he spread himself to give us a recommend?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"If he'd only called us hoss thieves 'or somethin', I could understand it," pursued Johnny, unheeding. "That would be natural, but this ain't. She's shore a cruel world for the wicked. Gimme the makin's, will yuh, Telescope? I'm plumb afoot for tobacco."

"Well," said the agent, with an air of mock sadness, "the United States Army will have to do the best it can without your help. I certainly wish you luck in your business of locating stray horses."

"Thanks," Johnny said dryly. "Is the red-head round the reservation now?"

"He may be, but I imagine he's gone back to the fort. He didn't stay here more than an hour or two."

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO AND TWO

JOHNNY and Laguerre spent the night in their blankets on the hospitable porch of the agent. In the morning they took the trail for Fort Yardley. They started before the moon-faced major had his detail. But half way to the fort the soldiers, their horses dripping with sweat and white with lather where leather touched hair, overtook and passed them. The officer gazed over the heads of the stray men, but they were not the sort to be ignored against their will.

"Tell the colonel we're comin', Major," shouted Johnny. "Yuh might ask him to have a li'l drink or two on ice while yo're about it."

"You ride so fas' you weel foundair de hoss," bawled Laguerre. "Un den *M'sieu' le Colonel* weel raise — wit' you."

The two rearmost cavalrymen risked court-martial to turn in their saddles and grin their appreciation. It is not often that the soldier's heart is made merry by civilian chaffing of an unpopular officer. And the major was distinctly not popular in his squadron.

"That colonel may just be fool enough to put us in the mill," said Johnny, coughing in the dust of the cavalry's passing, "but we gotta risk goin' through the fort. Anyway, they can't prove nothin'."

"We're all right," averred Laguerre. "'Less dat major she lie."

"I wouldn't put it beyond him. Leastwise I bet yuh he could stretch the truth an' not strain his conscience a heap, Gawd bless him."

Laguerre nodded absently.

"Eef dat red-head be de bad man why she say we good boy?" he puzzled, after a long minute's silence. "De blame for de hold-up o' de paymaster mus' be on somebody. 'Ere we are? W'y not us?"

"That's just the natural thing for a gent to do," Johnny said promptly. "I've been scratchin' the head about this, an' I figure her this away. Yore ordinary swizzletail who's figurin' on other folks' money does his best to set the blame on some gent. When he's done that, the poor fool thinks he's safe. He don't realize that chuckin' the blame that-away is the first step in cinchin' it on himself. 'Cause, do yuh see, straight gents ain't quick nohow to put the kibosh on anybody. An' they ain't quick to give a jigger they dunno a good recommend either. See anythin'?"

"I see w'at you mean, but——"

"Didn't that agent tell us the red-head went out of his way to say what li'l Sunday-school scholars we was? He ain' no shorthorn, an' he suspects us o' bein' after him, I tell yuh, an' he guesses right that to have the soldiers corral us or even suspect us, we'd shore suspect him o' bein' somethin' besides a long-legged stepladder with funny eyes an' red hair. There yuh got it in words of one syllable."

"Yes, yes," Laguerre broke in impetuously, "but she have warn' de colonel, dat red-headed man. I dunno w'y she do eet, but I 'ave tink un tink, un by gar she ees hones' ting for do."

"Aw! Three hells an' a dam, Telescope!" exclaimed

Johnny in amazement. "What yuh talkin' about? Are yuh crazy?"

"Naw, I ain' crazy. You are de crazy, mabbeso."

"Say, look here," entreated Johnny, and tapped his saddlehorn with a stiffened forefinger. "Don't yuh know it ain't natural to warn the soldiers of nothin' in this country? If the Injuns or rustlers run off any o' their hosses, don't we think she's a fine joke? S'pose some of 'em come to town an' get skun at draw, don't we laugh some more? S'pose now their paymaster is robbed? Serve him right, says we. Them officers never had any sense nohow, an' we'd laugh ourselves sick.

"Do yuh think we'd go outa our way to warn 'em to look out for their *dinero*? Do yuh think so? I guess not, old-timer, I guess not. We wouldn't travel two feet to do it. An' now here this red-headed skumarink rides from hell to breakfast to tell 'em some naughty men in the dark an' lonesome hills are a-layin' for their darlin' paymaster an' his li'l box o' gold beads. An' yuh think the red-head's doin' somethin' natural an' honest! Aw——, Telescope. Aw——some more!"

"But w'y she do eet, den?" demanded the unconvinced half-breed.

"I dunno why, I'm aimin' to find out."

"Yuh weel see den, by gar."

"Meanin' that yo're right, huh? I'll just go yuh, Telescope, one hundred to fifty, or higher if yuh like, that warnin' the C. O. is some kind o' trick."

"I weel not bet wit' you," Laguerre declared hastily. "Yuh ees too lucky."

Whereupon Johnny overwhelmed him with derision.

When the two stray men rode into Fort Yardley a full troop was standing to horse in front of the stables. The

punchers stopped at the post trader's for tobacco, matches, and air-tights. While the trader was handing down the canned tomatoes from an upper shelf the troop, in column of twos, thudded jinglingly past the door.

"Whatsa matter?" asked Johnny. "Why for the army?"

"Damfino," replied the trader. "Them cavalry's always ridin' round some'ers."

"I s'pose they gotta earn their li'l ol' pay somehow," nodded Johnny. "Seen anythin' o' Barry Camp here lately?"

"Barry Camp?"

"Red-headed gent with lots o' legs."

"That long-geared feller? Shore, he was here. Went away this mornin'."

"Did he say where he was goin'?"

"Shore did. Seymour City."

"Are yuh shore he said Seymour City?"

"O' course I'm shore. I remember it was Seymour City, 'cause he done said so more'n once while he was talkin'." Thus the trader, with some heat.

"No offence, stranger," soothed Johnny. "I was just kind o' surprised Barry didn't leave no word for us. He didn't, did he?" he added hastily.

"Not with me."

"Well, I guess maybe it don't matter. Better gimme six more sacks o' that tobacco, an' another box o' matches."

"Deed yuh see who was *officier* een dat troop?" inquired Laguerre, when they had remounted, and were riding south in the wake of the cavalry.

"Yuh was nearest the door," said Johnny, shaking his head.

"Dat major wit' de face all same full moon," nodded

Laguerre, "un two lieut'nant," he appended, with an eye to accuracy.

Johnny swore sharply.

"Yeah, she ees one fool," said the half-breed.

"I didn't mean that so much. But he'll make trouble for us if he can, an' I was kind o' figurin' on taggin' along south to Damson. That red-head, Telescope, is a feller we gotta watch."

"Mabbeso she go to Seymour City. We weel go dere too. I know girl een Seymour City." Laguerre cocked a hopeful eye at Johnny.

"The red-head ain't never goin' to Seymour City," declared Johnny, "or if he does she's only for a blind. He won't do nothin' important there, yuh can gamble on it. Didn't that trader say the red-head says twice how he was goin' to Seymour? An' he ain't the kind to tell his business free for nothin' to a gossipin' gent like a post trader without a reason. An' we can look for that reason a lot nearer than Seymour City."

"You ees worse dan Ol' Crook, Johnny," sighed Laguerre. "By gar, w'en I was scout for de Gray Fox I was ride ovair de country lak de speerit was chasse me, but I was have res' now un den. I t'ink I was eedjit fool for follow you, mabbeso. Huh? Naw, I weel not leave yuh. Yuh would geet los' or somet'ing."

Laguerre laughed slyly, and began to hum an old, old song of faraway Quebec.

An hour out of Fort Yardley the two stray men thought it well to leave the trail. For the red-head was suspicious of them. Both had been witnesses of Mat Neville's death. And there were many places on the trail south where an ill-intentioned man might lie in ambush and calm security and shoot and shoot again.

So they rode the cañons to the east and came out at last into the valley of the Dogsoldier on the range of the Flying M. Scotty and Doubleday were with the outfit somewhere in Cavalry Valley, the cook told them, when they came to the ranch-house kitchen demanding food.

Being a regular person, the cook asked no questions, but he stood in the doorway and scratched his head and looked after them as they rode away.

"They been out Gawd knows how long," he muttered. "They come in at four in the aft'noon, stuff 'emselves to the back teeth with chuck, catch up fresh hosses, an' away they go like they hadn't a minute to live. Them's shore the most energetic stray men I ever seen."

From the Flying M Johnny and Laguerre rode straight to Paradise Bend, their object to make judicious inquiry concerning the red-head. But that labour was saved them. Passing the hotel they saw the man himself, his heels higher than his head, sitting in a tip-tilted chair on the hotel porch. He nodded gravely to them, and they returned the nod and rode on to the hotel corral, where they unsaddled. Within the stockade the red-head's blue horse was dozing on three legs. There were no sweat-marks on the horse's hide.

"That hoss ain't been rode today," Johnny murmured to Laguerre. "The red-head's waitin' round for somethin'."

Dragging their saddles, they entered the hotel by the side door. They left their saddles in the barroom and drifted across the street to Soapy Ragsdale's store. But Soapy was not in, and small Buster knew not his whereabouts.

"Le's go down to the stage station," suggested Johnny. They went and, outside the stables, they found Racey

Dawson polishing two mules with a trace-chain. It appeared that Racey wished to harness the mules to a buckboard. The mules harboured other intentions.

"An' I thought Racey didn't know how to cuss," observed Johnny with placid delight, and squatted down on his heels to enjoy the view. "Ain't them the fightin'est mules?"

"They are," agreed a gloomy voice above him.

Johnny looked up into the face of a corporal of cavalry.

"An' me," continued the corporal, unhappily watching the mules try to shuck themselves out of their collars, "an me I gotta drive them bunches of dynamite from here to the railroad an' back to Fort Yardley. Gawd!"

The corporal departed muttering. Johnny, a thoughtful crease between his eyes, rose to his feet and with Laguerre went to help Racey. The latter was not grateful. He desired, profanely, to know why they hadn't come sooner. He dwelt monotonously on this point till a mule bit his leg and distracted his attention.

Came then a cavalry lieutenant and the Wells-Fargo agent, Tug Wilson. The latter, fairly drunk, essayed to assist the three in their labours.

"Gotta help get the bu-buckboard ready," he gabbled, clinging to a front wheel and diffusing abroad the rank odour of raw whisky. "Bu-buckboard for pup-pup-pay-master. Rashey, ol' boy, I wu-wish—say! Whasher matter?"

For the lieutenant had slipped a muscular arm under Wilson's elbow and was striving gently to pry the agent from his point of support.

"Let's go into the office," was the officer's earnest suggestion. "Let's go right now."

"I wan' hell-help harness mu-mu-mu-hools for pup-pup-

pupple-paymaster," Tug Wilson declared with owlish intentness. "Pup-paymaster goin' bring money—losh money—thu-thu-thoushands an' thoushands!"

In order fully to impress upon his hearers the magnitude of the amount, Tug Wilson released his grip on the wheel and spread wide his arms. The lieutenant profited by the opportunity to draw away the agent from the buckboard and tow him bargewise in the direction of the office.

"Paymaster, huh!" exclaimed Racey, battering the off mule into his proper place. "Now why can't the paymaster use a ambulance, I'd shore like to know?"

Johnny knew the answer to Racey's question. But he said nothing, and, by dint of a quick-working eye and much natural agility, contrived to hook the traces of the off mule without being kicked.

"Gawd help the corp'ral!" grunted Racey Dawson, when the vivacious team was finally hooked in. "Betcha ten they bust the buckboard on him, Johnny."

"Gimme one to ten an' I'll go yuh, hawg," countered Johnny. "What yuh want, a shore thing?"

"That's the only way I'd ever win any of yore money, old-timer. Where's that corp'ral? Wow-wow-whoop! Cavalry— here's yore team!"

The corporal came, wiping his mouth, and climbed, swearing under his breath, into the buckboard.

"Turn 'em loose," he grunted, his feet braced, the reins wrapped round his wrists.

Johnny and his friends moved quickly. So did the mules. The buckboard, bouncing limberly, careered away into the soft dusk.

"It's a wild life in the Far West," observed Johnny, looking after the retreating vehicle. "The corp'ral, he didn't say nothin' about no paymaster."

"I guess maybe he forgot," Racey hazarded lightly.

"I expect maybe he did," drawled Johnny, and went on to tell Racey a few things.

"Oh, yeah," said Racey, when his brain had grasped the significance of Johnny's words. "Oh, yeah, I did notice how the loot looked worried when Tug began to chatter about the paymaster an' his coin. A full troop's here now. They're camped north o' town a ways. Shore, they're the outfit you seen at Fort Yardley. That cussin' corporal told me they'd just come from there. Say, if she wasn't so serious, I'd laugh. Think o' that shavetail tellin' Tug what he wanted the buckboard for! Tug!"

Racey snorted in vast contempt. From the rear of the stage station drifted the sound of voices raised in argument.

"Listen to the loot tryin' to sober up Tug," chuckled Johnny.

"It'll take more'n language to do that," said Racey. "C'mon over. Maybe they'll fight or somethin'."

"Nemmine what they do. We want to know what happened since we left."

"Not a thing. The Bend's been stiller than a church on Monday."

"How long's the red-head been here?"

"Got in yesterday—Now, wait, wait, before yuh go bawlin' questions. I ain't quite a witless! I been watchin' him all I could ever since he got in an' he ain't been inside the Broken Dollar."

"That don't prove nothin'. He might 'a'——"

"He might," interrupted Racey, "but he didn't, old-timer. 'Cause yest'day afternoon Slay went ridin' with Dorothy Burr, an' this mornin' him an' his sister an' Dorothy went ridin' again, so——"

"Again!" Blankly.

"Yeah, again," Racey declared with relish. "What's it to yuh?"

"Me? Nothin'!" Ruffled indignation on the part of Johnny.

"Seems to me I heard——" began the irritating Racey, and paused, his expression demurely innocent.

"It don't matter what yuh heard," Johnny averred hastily. "Them long ears o' yores are liable to hear most anythin'. Y'ought to pin 'em back, Racey, ol' boy."

"I expect," grinned Racey. "As I was sayin', Johnny, before yuh began to stutter an' get so red an' funny-lookin', this here Slay and the red-head didn't have no chance to get together. I'd a' knowed it, if they had. Maybe they dunno each other."

"Maybe. We'll see. When did the soldiers sift in?"

"S'afternoon. Guess they'll be driftin' in the mornin'."

"When they do I'm goin' to trail 'em."

"Whaffor?"

"I want to see what's goin' to happen."

"Nothin'll happen. Them soldiers won't let it. Yo're wastin' time. Ain't he, Telescope?"

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders.

"I dunno, me," said he. "One thing good as anudder, I guess."

"That's right, let Johnny think he knows it all!" railed Racey. "He's bad enough now, but first thing yuh know he won't be fit to live with. Tell yuh what, Johnny, s'pose now I go south with yuh 'stead o' Telescope."

"Telescope's gotta watch out for the red-head."

"Fine, then I'll go with yuh."

"No, yuh won't. Somebody's gotta stay here an' look

after Harry Slay. Maybe the red-head will leave, see? Then where'd we be with nobody in the Bend?"

"Then you stay here an' lemme go," urged Racey. "I'm sick o' wrastlin' hosses an' mules."

"Whatsa matter?" Johnny demanded keenly. "Don't yuh enjoy goin' to the Broken Dollar—an' playin' the wheel?"

It was Racey's turn to flush, which he did grandly.

"Luck's only a word to me," he said self-consciously.

"She is to some folks," agreed Johnny. "They's a right pretty lady runnin' the wheel. Didja notice her?"

"I never did like black hair," dodged Racey. "Yaller's my favourite."

"Good strong colour," was Johnny's comment as he winked at Laguerre. "Feel like goin' down to the Broken Dollar with us, Racey, for a li'l whirl?"

"I shore don't," was Racey's answer.

"Maybe the Harper boys'll be there, an'——" began Johnny.

"Maybe they won't," interrupted Racey. "Spill ain't been round town for quite a while, an' Bale he slides out some'ers yest'day."

"Yest'day, huh. Before or after the red-head drifted in?"

"After."

"Oh, he did, did he? Ain't he the cunnin' li'l rascal? Mis' Burr or the cap'n home yet?"

"The cap'n's still out on his route, but the Missus she's home—I heard."

"Ain't yuh seen her?"

"How would I see her?" demanded Racey with what seemed most unnecessary heat. "I don't go romancin' that end o' town."

"Yuh don't," drawled Johnny, his eye-corners puckering. "Well, I wouldn't, either—considerin'."

"What yuh mean by that?" snarled Racey, with a very red face.

"I was just thinkin' it's a wild night on the canal," twinkled Johnny. "Yessir, them waves must be something tremendous."

"You go to — an' the Broken Dollar," Racey told him. "Me, I'm gonna look at that red-head person."

Racey, stiff-backed to exaggeration, marched away. Johnny and Laguerre dropped down to the Broken Dollar. As they passed the few playing the wheel—it was before the evening rush of customers—the radiant Mrs. Wallace saw them and nodded brightly. Harry Slay, standing tall and watchful at the end of the long bar, saw them and nodded not so brightly.

The two stray men drank sparingly of their liquor and watched the occupants of the room with carefully casual eyes. They were hoping that the red-head would appear. But of the many who came in at the open door that evening the red-head was not one. When the hands of the wall clock above the bar came together at midnight, Johnny yawned prodigiously and in a loud voice suggested bed.

Once in the outer dark the two separated, Johnny to go in search of Racey, and Laguerre to watch the Broken Dollar from the vantage-point of Finnegan's wood-pile across the street. Johnny did not find Racey at the hotel. The bartender did not know where the young man had betaken himself. The red-head was nowhere to be seen, and Johnny inwardly and heartily cursed the recreant Racey. Then he reflected with an incongruous sense of deep injury that it was just like Racey to go off without a

word. Might know it! If a man wanted things done right he had to do 'em himself!

The red-head's saddle lay in a corner of the barroom. But Johnny was not satisfied. He borrowed a lantern and looked over the horses in the corral till he found the red-head's blue.

"He must be round town some'ers," Johnny told himself, as he closed the gate.

Johnny, wishing he was triplets, went down to the stage station. He shook a hostler awake, vehemently demanding tidings of the station-boss. But the hostler was equally vehement in his denial of any knowledge concerning Racey and his movements.

The baffled Johnny was now more than ever out of patience with the world and its works. Hurriedly leaving the vicinity of the station and careless as to the placing of his feet, he walked straight into the business end of a horse that had in some manner escaped from the corral. Johnny did not know that this particular horse happened to be a mule, but he knew that there was no time to dodge.

Those intimately acquainted with the horse and its hybrid know that when there is no time to dodge, one must heartily crowd the hindquarters in question. In this way the kick is transformed into a push. Johnny crowded—hard. The mule delivered its nudge with both heels. The stray man moved sharply to the rear and sat down splashily in the overflow from the station watering-trough. The mule went elsewhere at a gallop.

Johnny swore aloud for he had meant to rock the mule.

He rose hastily, feeling very wet and itchy, and tenderly fingered his well-barked shins. Hobbling and muttering, he returned to Laguerre. The Broken Dollar was still in full blast.

"Slay's gotta go home some time," Johnny said, half an hour later. "Guess I better go an' scout up the house. Maybe the red-head's there waitin' for him. Wish I could find Racey. Hell's bells, she's a wonder I didn't break my leg!"

The unsympathetic half-breed chuckled, and Johnny departed wrathfully. At a little distance he halted and removed his spurs.

The house of the gambler was, of course, dark, but Johnny circled it with no more noise than that made by a light-footed cat and lay down between two little balsams some thirty feet from the edge of the front porch. He would have been pleased to go closer, but, were the red-head within, such a manoeuvre would be disastrous.

Thus he lay and waited, while the flying squadrons of the night lit and made merry upon exposed portions of his anatomy. In the intervals of killing midges and buzz-bugs he found time to think on a subject that more than hazily filled the far background of his mind.

"It's a shame," he reflected, "the way that jigger Slay is makin' himself too popular. This is shore gettin' serious. First thing Dorothy knows she'll wake up 'an find herself married to this feller."

Johnny rolled his eyes at the very idea and slew a buzz-bug that was creeping into his ear.

"If I could only show how Slay's a road agent quick an' sudden," he went on glumly, "it would be a heap providential, an' it'd save me trouble—a whole lot o' trouble. I wouldn't have to go fussin' round cuttin' Slay out with the lady. As if I wanted to marry Dorothy! Scotty's a plumb fool, the ol' bushwhacker. Why, if I did I bet she'd make me save money! Yessir, I'll bet—she—she was plenty pretty when she was makin' them pies. An' she

can shore cook. Aw, what I wanna get married for! Time enough when I get to be an old man."

He conjured before his mind's eye a vision of the lady he would like to marry when an old man. Strangely enough the vision bore a most remarkable resemblance to the young and winsome Dorothy Burr.

"Well, if she ain't married by then, maybe I will marry her," he told himself generously.

In some ways, Johnny Ramsay was tediously young.

The slithering sound of a pebble kicked into action by an advancing foot flattened Johnny to the ground. A bobbing spark appeared above the path leading to the house. The spark glowed as the smoker inhaled deeply and revealed the thin-lipped mouth and long pointed nose of the gambler, Slay. Johnny heard the thin rustle of taffeta and then:

"Don't walk so fast, Harry," begged a soft, sweet voice.

"You *will* wear high heels," replied Harry, slackening not his pace.

"You want me to." Reproachfully.

"Well, I——"

"Let's not quarrel to-night, please," urged the sweet voice. "I'm so tired."

"You're always tired lately," said Slay irritably. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"I think it's my nerves."

"Nerves! You're a fine one to have nerves. What are you going to do—give way?"

"I only know I'm awfully tired." The sentence trailed off in a weary little sigh.

"You can rest on the porch," grunted Slay. "Here we are."

Two figures were silhouetted a moment against the stars and Johnny perceived that the smaller was a good ten feet behind the larger.

"Guess she's his sister all right enough," thought the cynical Johnny.

The figures vanished in the utter darkness of the porch. Chair-legs scraped along the boards. A V-shaped splotch of white showed against the blackness.

"I would take off my shawl if I were you!" observed Slay sarcastically. "You wore it wrapped round you all the way up, and now——"

Obediently the V-shaped splotch disappeared.

"What do you want to do—catch cold?" went on the petulant Slay.

"How solicitous we have become!" A rising note of hysteria was in the tone of her voice.

"You're needed in the business," came the direct statement pat as a slap in the face.

"Some day I shall certainly leave you." The lady's voice was no longer hysterical. It was icy with anger.

"No, I don't think you will."

"Oh, won't I?"

"No, Sis, I don't believe you could ever bring yourself to leave darling brother."

"You flatter yourself."

"Do I?"

There was no answer, and then Slay laughed a low, uncheerful laugh.

"We've got to stick together, and you know it," he said earnestly. "We may have our little spats now and then, but they don't mean anything. We both have tempers—and must make allowances accordingly."

"Oh certainly, by all means we must make allowances!

You mean that you may be as hateful as you please and I must make the allowances."

"Try and preserve your sense of proportion, can't you?"

Mrs. Wallace laughed aloud. Oddly enough, it was a laugh of genuine amusement.

"You're more insufferable than a husband," she exclaimed.

"Oh, you know."

"I do. I do indeed. I've known a few men, and of all the masses of conceit I ever ran across, you are the most massive."

"Huh." Contemptuously.

"Huh all you please. You think I'm tied to you, do you? By what, if you please? Common interests? Have we any? If so, what are they? Sisterly affection? My dear man, that vanished long ago. Remains then—what?"

"I tell you quite frankly that I don't know what keeps me in the neighbourhood. I've put up with your nagging and utter selfishness for a great deal longer than has been good for me, and some day, Mister Man, you will receive a vivid surprise—— That's right, swear, do! Be just as disagreeable as you can! But remember I've warned you."

Johnny heard Mrs. Wallace rise, heard the brisk click of her high heels as she walked across the porch into the house, heard the vicious slam of the front door, and cursed inwardly.

"That's always the way," he mourned. "Just when she's ready to blat out somethin' worth while she gets mad an' hops in the house. An' all I wanted was a li'l word. Now, I'll bet the red-head won't even come."

Johnny disconsolately watched the firefly spark and

glow of Slay's cigar end. The midges and buzz-bugs revelled undisturbed. Johnny did not dare make any noise. He did not know how acute might be the gambler's hearing.

At long last Slay threw away his stub and lit another cigar—and still nothing happened. This was not in the least like a detective story Johnny had once read. In the said absorbing tale the hero had eaves-dropped with great abandon, obtaining thereby the most important information. In one instance the villain, while the hero lay concealed under a bed, soliloquized at some length to his own ultimate confusion and the profit of the clever sleuth.

"The feller that wrote that book shore didn't know what he was talkin' about," concluded Johnny. "Here's all the chance in the world for Slay to tell the story of his life an' he sits there like a dumb bump on a log. It ain't right."

Silence endured on the porch and among the balsams for the greater part of two hours. The east began to lighten and Johnny began to perspire. For he knew that he could not depart unheard, and he was averse to shooting Slay beneath the bedroom window of his sister, as it were. It would be too much like murder. Yet, should Slay continue to sit and the east continue to lighten he would be compelled to do that very thing—or be himself shot. Johnny cautiously dragged out his six-shooter.

Ten minutes later Slay went into the house. The door had barely closed when Johnny was wriggling backward along the ground. Within three minutes he was walking to the hotel in the cool grayness of the new day.

Johnny had two hours sleep and appeared at breakfast a trifle blear-eyed. He found Laguerre and the red-head eating side by side. Johnny nodded to them, wolfed his meal in silence, and hurried down to the stage station.

"I thought you was goin' to watch the red-head last night," he said to Racey, in the comparative privacy of the open space in front of the corrals.

"I did watch him till him an' Soapy an' Jim Mace an' Carey got to playin' draw over in Soapy's place. Then I drifted after tellin' Soapy to come wake me when they got through. I knowed Soapy could be trusted thataway, an' I was Gawd awful sleepy, so I bedded down adjacent under that freight-wagon beyond the waterin'-trough. But Soapy didn't come, an' I slept till mornin' except once when some drunkard come stumblin' round an' got all tangled up with Smith's mule Dolly, an' Dolly she kicked the poor fool into the waterin'-trough, an' he went off cussin' an' swearin'.

"Serve him right. I felt like kickin' him myself, wakin' me up an' all. Whatsa matter? What yuh lookin' at me so funny for, huh? Look—— Say, they's dried mud on yore chaps! I'll bet you was that drunkard, Johnny! It was you! By Gawd I know it was or yuh wouldn't look at me thataway. Didn't yuh know no better'n to go pullin' Dolly's tail? Gee, that's rich. Here! What-yuh tryin' to do?"

SPLASH!

For Racey, in his carelessness, had been leaning against the upper end of the watering-trough, and Johnny, a-tingle with the memory of Dolly and the futile hours spent with buzz-bugs, had yielded to the impulse of the moment.

CHAPTER XIX

BUSHWHACKERS

NO, JOHNNY, Dorothy ain't home. She went out ridin' with Harry Slay. So yo're workin' for Scotty, now, huh? How's tricks with you? Yo're lookin' fine. When did yuh leave the Cross-in-a-box? An' how's that good-for-nothin' Jack Richie brother o' mine? I declare, yuh'd think he'd never had a sister the way he don't write. Land sakes, here I am a-keepin' yuh a-standin' there an' not askin' yuh in. But that's me. I always was careless about my manners.

"C'min, Johnny, an' rest yore hat. There's Benjamin's partic'lar chair, an' yuh can roost yore feet on the rung an' talk to me while I mix up a cake—chocolate cake, Johnny. Yuh'll stay to dinner, o' course—— What? One o' Benjamin's partic'lar personal friends an' yuh trot right off thisaway? Yuh gotta stay to dinner. I wanna hear all about Tom an' Kate an' that li'l Junior child. I know you've seen 'em. Just you go right now an' put that cayuse in the corral."

Tall, angular Mrs. Burr slapped her arms akimbo. Her harsh features radiated hospitality as she beamed at Johnny Ramsay. But that perturbed young man took no comfort in her smiles. Dorothy had gone riding again with Slay!

"I can't stay, Mis' Burr," he told her, forcing his pleasantest expression. "I'd shore like to, but I got my job

to look out for. I guess I'll be weavin' along. S'long. See yuh later."

Johnny stuck foot in stirrup, slid into the saddle, and whirled his horse. Mrs. Burr followed his progress to Main Street with wistful eyes. She liked Johnny Ramsay.

The red-head was not visible on the hotel porch when Johnny passed down Main Street. But his horse, as Johnny took good care to make sure, as he rode by, was in the corral. On two chairs, tiptilted against the façade of Ragsdale's store, sat the proprietor and Telescope Laguerre. The attitudes of both men were patently lethargic, but they came alive sufficiently to nod to Johnny. Laguerre even jiggled a languid hand. After which the half-breed pulled his hat-brim forward and appeared to fall into a gentle doze.

Johnny's mouth- corners quirked with satisfaction. From the sidewalk in front of Ragsdale's store a man might without effort observe all that went on in the vicinity of the hotel and the corral. Likewise, Main Street, from the same vantage-point, was open to the view throughout its breadth and length.

Beyond the river the trampled trail was evidence enough that the cavalry had passed that way. Johnny, to whom the grind of trailing appealed not at all, suddenly resolved to change his plans and precede the military to the railroad.

"Why for have I gotta swallow their dust for a week?" he asked himself. "Maybe if I hit Damson ahead of 'em I'll learn somethin' real nice an' nifty, which is me, yores truly, forty ways from the jack."

To avoid a meeting with the soldiers Johnny and his mount departed from the trail and the cañons of the region swallowed them up.

Four days later Chuck Morgan's wife, swabbing out her

dish-pan in the old C Y ranch-house on Soogan Creek, was startled by the abrupt arrival of a scrubby-faced young man who said he was hungry. Jane Morgan was not an inquisitive person, but she wondered as she fed the traveller, why Johnny Ramsay was in such a hurry and why he wasn't even decently communicative. It wasn't like him—either the hurry or the short answers. Poor boy, he looked tired out.

"Have another cup?" she asked, poisoning the coffee-pot invitingly.

"I'm full to the roof o' my mouth," said Johnny, shaking his head. "Guess I'll just smoke a pill while the li'l hoss rests his feet. The oats yuh gimme will put new life in him. How's Chuck?"

It is to be feared that Johnny was in an abstracted mood that day. For he could not have definitely told how Chuck was two minutes after Jane Morgan had replied.

Within two days Johnny Ramsay, choosing the night-time for his entry, oozed unostentatiously into Marysville, the county seat of Fort Creek County. He went at once to the house of Judge Allison, his very good friend. The jurist, wise in his generation, made no comment when Johnny drew down every blind in the judicial sitting room. He gave Johnny a drink of excellent whisky, hearkened while the stray man asked a question, and slowly shook his white head.

"The local bad men are accounted for," he said. "We only had three. The Circle S outfit lynched Dave Long last week, and Little Bill and Slim Edwards became embroiled in the small matter of an extra ace day before yesterday and most considerately eliminated themselves—Yes, I know there are in town two or three others that will bear watching, but these few are small fry, lacking the

heart for great enterprise. Is it a fair question to ask why you——”

The judge put his finger points together and looked inquiringly at Johnny.

“Well, yuh see——” hesitated the stray man.

“There, there, that’ll do,” said the judge hastily. “Don’t bother to explain. I shouldn’t have asked. How’s business up where you are?”

Johnny’s eyes twinkled.

“Yo’re a real human man, Judge,” he said. “I wish I could tell yuh, but I ain’t none too certain about a lot o’ things myself. Know a jigger named Bale Harper, Judge?”

Judge Allison was one of those happily gifted folk that never forget names or faces.

“When I was in the Bend two years ago,” was the judge’s answer, “Jim Mace pointed out Bale Harper to me. Why?”

“I was just wonderin’ if by any chance the gent had been in Marysville?”

“He is.”

“Oh, he is, is he?” chuckled Johnny, his eyes glinting in the lamplight. “How long has he been here?”

“Since day before yesterday. I was on the porch of the Sunrise when he rode in.”

“Come alone?”

“No, there was a man with him, a customer even more tough-looking than Friend Bale, name of Keen.”

Johnny banged a resentful fist on his knee.

“Might ‘a’ knowed it!” he cried. “I clean forgot all about Tom Keen when I was in the Bend. When did yuh see ‘em last, Judge?”

“This afternoon in the Sunrise.”

"Maybe they've gone."

"We can easily decide that point. Suppose we step down to the Sunrise for a smile. If they're not there we'll look about."

"I ain't a heap anxious to have 'em see me," objected Johnny.

"In that case allow me to play the detective," suggested the accommodating judge. "There's a Chicago paper on that shelf."

While Johnny sat and waited and read the Chicago paper came the sound of footsteps on the sidewalk. The feet stopped at the judge's door and knuckles rapped on the panel.

Johnny muttered appropriately at this mischance and started to tiptoe across the floor.

Before he could reach the doorway giving access to the dining room, the front door opened. Johnny promptly altered course toward a match safe hanging on the wall and glanced over his shoulder. The man looking in out of the night was Jack Murgatroyd, the slimmer and older half of Sheriff Stahl's force of deputies. His eyes, small and bright as black beads, stared at Johnny. He nodded curtly, entered, closed the door behind him, wiped his swarthy features on his sleeve and remarked that it was a hot night. Johnny Ramsay, busily engaged in stuffing his hatband with the contents of the match safe on the wall, observed that it was hotter than that.

The deputy appeared to ponder this statement a moment. Then he crossed the floor to the nearest chair, sat, and rolled him a cigarette. Ever a silent person Jack acted in character for fully fifteen minutes before he spoke. Johnny had long since returned to his friend the Chicago paper.

"Seen the judge?" asked the deputy.

Johnny affected to be startled.

"For Gawd's sake, Jack," he exclaimed with admirably simulated irritation, "might as well kill a man as scare him to death thisaway. I'd clean forgot there was anybody else in the room. Some day, I'm tellin' yuh, yuh'll strain yore throat talkin' so much."

Jack smiled wintrily.

"I shore gotta look out for that throat," he said, and smiled again his January smile. "I was askin' yuh about the judge."

"He's down street some'ers," replied Johnny. "Didja look in the Sunrise?"

"No." Jack shook his head.

Ensued another long silence.

"Did the judge have a game on or somethin'?" inquired the deputy suddenly.

"There yuh go again—an' me with my weak heart."

"Guess yore heart an' my throat'd make a pair, huh?"

"Not to draw to," denied Johnny, at which Jack Murgatroyd laughed as at the most side-splitting joke and repeated his question.

"I dunno," said Johnny, and turned a sheet. "He didn't say nothin' about no li'l game. But you know Judge Allison, Jack, he don't always say what he's goin' to do next."

"I expect," said Jack Murgatroyd.

An hour later Judge Allison returned. He greeted the deputy briefly and sat down before his table. Murgatroyd dropped his cigarette on the floor and crushed it beneath a spurred heel.

"Just stopped in to tell yuh Judge, that they won't be

no trial o' Hen Riley next week," remarked Mr. Murgatroyd.

"Why on earth did they lynch him?" queried the judge, jumping at the most natural conclusion. "That Single bartender wasn't popular?"

"They didn't lynch him. He done picked the lock of the calaboose door at Rocket an' e-loped on the sheriff's own hoss."

"Which is rather ironical when you stop to consider," observed the judge.

"Ain't it," said Murgatroyd, quite at sea as to the meaning of the word "ironical." "The sheriff an' Chance is trailin' Hen now—he rode north. But Bill Stahl's Steamboat is one fast, sur-vigorous cayuse."

"Did you ride from Rocket merely to tell me this about Hen?"

"No, I'm just passin' through on my way to the railroad, an' Bill he told me to be shore to stop an' tell yuh so's yuh'd know what to expect when Hen didn't show up on time. Bill's sendin' me to Damson an' Piegan an' them towns to scout round. He's got a idea maybe them road agents that's been hellin' around has got friends or some-thin' on the railroad. So long, Judge. So long, Johnny. Hot night."

Jack Murgatroyd tilted his hat and was gone.

"I'll bet that's the first long speech he ever made in his life," observed Johnny.

The judge nodded, and poured himself a modest two fingers.

"He must have been drinking," he suggested. "There's the bottle, Johnny. It's your move. When you've made it, we'll adjourn, if you don't mind, to the bench back of the stable. There's a breeze there."

"An' that's more'n they is here with the blinds down an' the lamp goin'," grinned Johnny. "No more, thank yuh, Judge. Yore whisky ain't the stuff to make a habit of. It spoils the taste for ordinary paint. Any time yo're ready."

There was not much of a breeze on the bench behind the stable, but such as it was they unbuttoned their shirts and prepared to make the most of it.

"They're at the dance-hall," said the judge in a low tone, "and not in the main part of the building either. That's why it took me so long to find them. They were in one of the small back rooms. Tom Keen was sitting at the table with his face in his hands, looking at nothing. Bale was walking up and down. Every now and then he'd stop, pour himself a fresh drink and gulp it down. They looked as if they were waiting for something."

"Maybe they are," observed Johnny.

The judge shot him a sidewise glance and fanned his hot face with his hat.

"What did they do when yuh went in the room?" questioned Johnny.

"I didn't go in the room," was the judge's ingenuous denial. "I saw them through the window."

"Judge, I'm a-goin' to tell yuh somethin'," Johnny said, suddenly feeling that Judge Allison had earned an explanation, and went on to tell the jurist of his present mission in life. The judge's interest was flattering.

"An' that's all I know," concluded Johnny. "What do you think?"

The judge lit a cigar before replying. He regarded the glowing tip in silence a moment.

"I think I know Barry Camp," he said at last. "The description tallies with that of a tinhorn who used to oper-

ate in Piegan City about three years ago. Dave Yule was the name he used. 'Reddy' Yule the boys called him. He stayed about six months, then he shot one of the boys, and public opinion bringing pressure to bear he thought it well to leave town. Your friend Camp is Yule. No doubt of it. That hairless face, those blank staring yellow eyes, and the man's other characteristics haven't any duplicates in this territory—— What? No, he can't be arrested for the Piegan City killing. It looked like an even break."

"Yeah," nodded Johnny, thinking of the manner of Mat Neville's death. "That's the red-head's specialty—— makin' it look like an even break."

"He's clever."

"He's worse 'n that. Yuh don't remember ever seein' him round this part o' the country, do yuh?"

"I do not. I never even heard of him since the Piegan City days till you spoke of him to-night. But I think you're wrong in one premise, Johnny. That red-headed tinhorn and Harry Slay are not partners in this hold-up business."

"You must 'a' seen Mis' Wallace," Johnny said keenly.

"Petticoats never have influenced me," shot back the judge. "I know Slay——played draw with him every time I've visited the Bend, and he's an honest gambler. When a gambler is straight in his profession he doesn't walk crookedly otherwise. Slay's all right. Just because he formed a slight dislike for you——"

"Slight dislike!" cut in the indignant Johnny. "He tried to have me lynched!"

"But then you see he thought you were a road agent," the judge explained smoothly. "His action was natural."

"Maybe it was, but it don't make me love him none. You act like I'd ought to kiss him or somethin'."

"You're prejudiced against Slay," insisted the judge. "He's no friend of mine, but I shouldn't care to see injustice done him—or any one. By the way, I hear he's engaged to Dorothy Burr. Is it true?"

"It's a lie!" cried Johnny. "He's only a friend of hers, that's all."

Judge Allison smiled into the darkness. He believed he knew the reason for Johnny's vehemence. Rumour wears swift wings in the cow country—and Captain Burr's daughter was a very pretty girl.

"Guess maybe I'll borrow yore a-larm clock, Judge," said Johnny, yawning and stretching elaborately. "I'll roll in on yore hay in the stable. I'm gonna drift south at four so's nobody will see me. I might be back later."

"You'll sleep in the house," the judge declared firmly. "I've an extra bed, and it's yours. Let's go in. I'm sleepy myself."

At a few minutes past four in the morning Johnny Ramsay was riding the Damson trail. At six o'clock, when his horse topped a wooded ridge, a backward glance revealed to Johnny that two horsemen were up and coming on the dusty track. Johnny rode on thoughtfully, thankful that he and his horse were invisible among the trees.

At the foot of the reverse slope the trail crossed a gravelly wash. Johnny swung his horse into the wash, rode along it for a quarter-mile, found a tiny stream, and followed its bed to where it bisected a round and grassy basin set cup-like among hills. Which hills were covered with a thin growth of mournful pines.

Twenty minutes later Johnny's horse, tied to a pine, was beginning to doze peacefully in his favourite three-cornered attitude, while his master lay on his stomach

behind a low and twisted jack-pine and watched the distant trail with alert eyes.

The two horsemen lifted into sight at the top of the sway-backed ridge. Black dots against the gray-green slope, they slid down to the gravelly wash, paused not at all, and held on along the trail.

"Wish I'd thought to find out what colour hosses Bale an' Keen was ridin'," lamented Johnny, his eye- corners puckered. "Bay—or red, these two, but they might be straddled by first an' foremost citizens for all I can tell. Why didn't I get the judge to find out for me?"

He frowningly constructed a cigarette, lit it, and rolled over on his back to wait a decent interval before riding on. The trail and the two riders that rode it were hidden behind a swelling fold of rising ground that ran in a long half moon across the face of the land. The arc of the half moon bent northward and the trail showed again in a short white strip beyond the western horn before it vanished in the pale green coolness of the cottonwoods lining the banks of Bubbling Creek.

On the farther side of the creek the trail slanted into sight across the broad breast of a pillow-shaped hill with a notched shoulder and lost itself in the notch.

Johnny, flat on his back, finished his cigarette. It was eminently peaceful on the top of his hill. A friendly wind blew softly in among the pines and made them sing. Johnny pulled his hat over his face.

He awoke with a start, rolled over on his elbows and looked about him suspiciously. But everything was as it should be: the horse dozed three-cornered, the sweet, sharp odour of the singing pines was in his nostrils, the peace of ages continued to hang upon the landscape. Johnny's eyes instinctively sought that part of the countryside

where the trail showed white beyond the western horn of the half moon of rising ground. And as he looked two darkish dots came into view upon that streak of trail and vanished where it vanished in the shadow of the cottonwoods along the creek.

Johnny waited for the two dots to reappear on the trail where it crossed the slope of the pillow-shaped hill with the notched shoulder. They did not. But within fifteen minutes he saw them doubling back toward the tip of the half moon's western horn.

"They's boulders there, an' one fine long outcrop," said Johnny aloud.

He nodded his head as the dots left the trail and stopped several hundred yards beyond it, and well inside the horn of the half moon.

"Leavin' their hosses so far away they won't whinner," he went on.

Two specks detached themselves from the dots, moved back toward the trail slanted up the slope to the horn and disappeared among the boulders.

"Ain't they the tadpoles!" Johnny observed admiringly. "Yuh might almost think them fellers was layin' to bushwhack somebody. Yessir, yuh shore might. Maybe it's another hold-up though. The Damson stage ought to pull through in an hour. Guess Li'l Willie better wait an' watch the pretty birdies."

So little Willie waited and watched apathetically till a cloud of dust lifting and drifting above the horn of the half moon heralded the coming of the southbound stage. There were no sudden smoke-puffs above the boulders. The stage appeared on the streak of trail leading to the creek. The two men in ambush made no hostile move. The stage continued without interruption to the creek,

rolled in under the cottonwoods, rolled out beyond the ford, and snailed upward toward the notch in the pillow-shaped hill.

"I guess I'm elected all right," murmured Johnny. "Range is two thousand easy," he added, pondering deeply. "I'd shore like to know—guess now I might as well go'n find out."

He rose to his feet, went to his horse, and mounted. Taking care to keep happily placed ridges between himself and the men lying on the half moon's horn Johnny worked his way to the creek. Heading up-stream toward the ford he rode warily among the cottonwoods till no more than a half mile of level ground separated him from the horses of the bushwhackers.

It looked like a good place to stop. For there were red willows growing above a cutbank, below which Bubbling Creek ran among rocks and gossiped to itself with a pleasant sound of splashing.

Johnny tied the horse between the bank and the willows, dragged Daisy Belle from the scabbard under the left fender and "Injuned" forward on foot. When he came near the ford he stopped and squatted on his heels behind a thick little red willow.

The horses of the two bushwhackers were not more than three hundred yards distant. Of the men themselves he could see nothing. But on the ridge of the half moon's horn he could see plainly the rocks and the angling white outcrop that hid the precious pair.

Crack! A rifle spoke among the rocks. A spurt of smoke drifted across the outcrop. *Crack! Crack! Crack!* Another Winchester joined the first. The marksman, by the smoke, was fortified behind a large boulder on the outcrop's right flank.

Cra-ack! A pause. *Cra-ack!* Another pause. *Cra-ack!* Some one several hundred yards beyond the bushwhackers was shooting very methodically. The first two shots evidently struck and stopped, but the third ricocheted and keyholed with a tearing whistle high above Johnny's head. The two rifles among the boulders snarled furiously, Occasionally the painstaking rifle in the distance would reply.

"By the racket these two are makin'," observed Johnny, with a grin, "Mister Slowfire on the other side must 'a' tickled 'em up. Maybe they ain't after me—by Gawd!"

The oath was called forth by the idea that had struck him. It was an excellent idea, and it contained a large element of risk.

"But they'll be too busy to look round," reasoned Johnny, greatly taken with his excellent idea. "An' if they do——"

He left the sentence unfinished, rose to his feet, cocked his rifle, and started toward the horses of the bushwhackers. He reached them without incident, calmly picked up the trailing reins and led both animals back to the cottonwoods.

Once in the shelter of the belt of trees, he unhurriedly searched the saddle-bags and canteenas. Among other articles in the pocket of one cantena he found a flannel shirt with an ancient envelope in the breast pocket. The envelope was filled with cigarette papers. So ancient was the envelope that Johnny could not at first decipher the address. But finally, by holding the envelope at a certain angle, he made out that it was addressed to William Harper at Paradise Bend. Bale Harper's other name was William.

"Wish they hadn't tore the stamp an' postmark off," grumbled the never-satisfied Johnny Ramsay. "I'd shore like to know where she was mailed."

Johnny's busy fingers pried into the saddle-bags on the other horse. There was nothing in them to give a hint to the owner's identity. Nor was there anything revealing in the cantenas. He loosed the slicker tied behind the cantle. There were no marks save those of wear on that slicker, but its removal bared to public gaze a staple pocket on the back of the cantle. Some one had burnt, with a running iron, on the flap of the staple pocket, the initials T. K.

"Tom Keen," smiled Johnny, listening to the sounds of battle on the half moon's horn. "They ain't ridin' this trail for no good, that's a cinch. Mister! just listen to 'em a-wastin' cartridges like they cost nothin'. They must be packin' a couple o' belts apiece. Wonder who they're shootin' at."

Johnny felt no great curiosity as to the identity of the unhappy individual. Whoever he might be, he was no friend of his, of course. He might even be a horse thief or some one equally nefarious, and Messrs. Harper and Keen might be engaged in a kindly deed. Who could tell? Johnny, being a sensible person with business of his own, had no intention of mixing in the private affairs of other men. He did not consider the removal and search of the bushwhackers' property in the least out of the way. It was necessary.

"Guess I'll just lead these cayuses along with me awhile," observed Johnny. "Settin' Bale an' Tom afoot will do 'em a whole heap o' good."

He mounted one of the animals and, leading the other, rode back to his horse. Arrived at the clump of red willows and his tail-switching pony, he began to be intrigued in spite of himself by that intermittent firing in the distance. It was palpably none of his business, yet. . . .

The man lying behind the dead horse in the middle of the trail swore feelingly and tucked up his legs as a bullet grazed his left heel. That plunging piece of lead had been the tenth nearly to make him a cripple. He levered in a cartridge, shoved his Winchester across the neck of the horse and took a snapshot at a smoke-filled opening between two boulders on the crest of the half moon's horn. He did not expect to score a hit. By the manner in which his two enemies fought he judged them to be gentlemen of experience, and gentlemen of experience in warfare either dodge or change position after each shot, and these had been doing both.

It was an exceedingly one-sided affair, this little wayside brush. The sun was directly in the eyes of the man behind the dead horse, and it was only a question of time when one of his foes would work round to the flank and rear. Luckily there was no cover except three lone cottonwoods and an outcrop on either flank or the rear nearer than a thousand yards.

The man in the road was confident of being able to drop any one sufficiently ill-advised to attempt to reach the cottonwoods or the outcrop. He had ammunition in sufficient quantity to make it interesting—for a while. If he could stick it out till nightfall—or if a friend would happen that way; even the arrival of a nodding acquaintance or a total stranger, so that he were well-disposed, would be welcome.

The man behind the horse, having emptied his magazine, awkwardly, for he was cramped for room, began to stuff the long brass shells through the loading-gate. Before he completed the operation three bullets had furrowed the hide of his breastwork and one had grazed his shoulder. He could feel the blood, warm as perspiration, trickling

down his chest. The wound stung and made him thirsty. He wished for a drink of the tepid water in his canteen, but that useful article was lying well down beneath some nine hundred and fifty pounds of dead pony.

Cra-ack! The report of a rifle sounded faintly on his left front. He thought instantly that the enemy had begun to work round him. But no buzzing piece of lead sailed over his head or tucked into the body of his mount! The rifles of his enemies ripped into hysterical action. No lead came his way. The inference was obvious. The friend had arrived.

The man behind the dead horse backed his rescuer shot for shot. The latter must have had a good position, for, while the fire of the bushwhackers dwindled to some exceedingly scattered shooting, the other's increased steadily.

A quarter of an hour after the first shot from that distant Winchester the bushwhackers' rifles were silent. A less prudent man than the one behind the horse would have gone forward to investigate. But he had fought the Indian many times. There might be a trick. He was content to remain where he was.

Minutes later he heard shots fired on the other side of the half moon. The friendly Winchester had not ceased to fire. The smoke of it was thick among the distant boulders. The sound of the shots behind the crescent became fainter and fainter.

Suddenly the man behind the dead horse jumped to his feet and ran as swiftly as his high heels would allow toward the tip of the half moon's horn. It was a run of several hundred yards. He arrived out of breath and puffing and plunged down behind a jagged rock. What he saw was in a measure gladdening. Toward the cottonwoods lining the bank of the creek, two men were scuttling for dear life

—literally. About their hurrying feet jets of dust sprang up and mushroomed in little filmy clouds. The man threw his rifle forward and fired again and again. But he was too shaken with fast running for anything even approaching accurate shooting. The two men charged in among the trees. The man sent seven shots to hasten their going. There was no reply.

So he lay and watched the belt of green trees for a time. But nothing happened. He took off his hat and raised his head above the level of the rock. Not a shot. Then he rose to his feet, went back to his horse, and, with his rifle-barrel, levered up the body and freed the canteen.

Over the bulge of the tilted canteen he saw riding toward him down the slope of the half moon, a young man. The young man was leading two horses, and he was coming at a sharp lope. The man's black eyes glittered.

"Good boy, dat Johnny Ramsay," said Telescope Laguerre.

"Yay, old-timer!" bawled the approaching rider. "I never knowed it was you they was tryin' to rub out till I come scoutin' along the rimrock an' recognized yore dead hoss. Even then I wasn't a heap shore."

"I am glad you was tak a chance," said Laguerre simply. "I tell you, my friend, I t'ink one tam she was all day wit' me, mabbeso. W'ere you geet de two cayuse?"

"They belong to them bushwhackers, Mister Harper and Mister Tom Keen," grinned Johnny. "They was standin' there all so free an' handy, so I just glommed on to 'em. Climb on, Telescope. We ain't got time to blat round here thisaway."

"Yuh wait tell I geet my saddle off. I wan' for see w'ere dem men was hide. I heet one, I think, me."

"You did not. They ran away too fast."

"I crease one mabbeso."

"Like—say, Telescope, yo re nicked yoreself! Yore shirt's all blood. How——"

"Small leetle graze," Laguerre interrupted impatiently. "Not hurt 'tall."

He fastened his own saddle behind Bale Harper's cante, swung up with a nimble legsweep and galloped up the slope with Johnny.

Carefully refraining from exposing their persons on the skyline they inspected the places where the bushwhackers had lain. There were many spent forty-five ninety shells scattered about, and on a flat rock between two boulders a splash of red.

"Told yuh so!" Johnny, who had done nothing of the kind, hastened to say. "Daisy Belle an' me are shore reg'lar folks. We never miss."

"You tell me so!" cried Laguerre indignantly. "Yuh tell me so! I tell yuh, Johnny, dat was my shot do dat. I was see dees man right troo de sight, an'——"

"Well, all right, s'posin' yuh did," flashed Johnny, switching to the rightabout with pliant ease. "S'posin' yuh did. What good did yuh do? Lookit the way he run off. Ragged work, Telescope, ragged work. But don't yuh care. Some day, if yuh watch my smoke real careful an' profuse, an' if yuh can get as good a rifle as Daisy Belle, which yuh can't, yuh 'll maybe learn how to shoot. I don't say yuh will certain shore. But maybe yuh will."

Laguerre, moved to wrathful reply, incautiously stepped forward beyond the outcrop. Instantly, from the spot where the trail entered the cottonwoods, a rifle cracked. A bullet struck a rock at his right hand and buzzed off at an angle. The half-breed dropped behind the outcrop,

clicked in a cartridge and fired at the drift of gray smoke. He would have fired again, but Johnny grabbed him by the toe of his boot.

"C'mon, c'mon," urged Johnny. "Them sharps'll keep. I dunno what yo're agoin' to do, but I'm agoin' somewhere, an' I'm agoin' right now at once. I wanna get to Damson an' I can't do it by sittin' here watchin' you blow holes through li'l cottonwood trees that never didja any harm."

"Nevair you min' about dem tree," Laguerre said placidly, his good humour completely restored. "You t'ink yuh was de shore shot, but some day I show yuh, by gar."

He crawfished to the rear, rolled over and sat upright. Rifle across his knees he grinned up into Johnny's face.

"Eet ees bes' I stay here, mabbeso," he suggested.

"What for?"

"W'y yuh guess I come sout'?"

"I was meanin' to ask yuh that only work's been sort o' brisk an' busy the last few minutes. I bite. Why?"

"'Cause dat red-head she ees ride aftair de cavalry, she was meet de cavalry, un she was ride wit' de lieut'nant, un stay wit' him, by gar. I do not unnerstan' dat, me. So I come for fin' yuh. I tell yuh, Johnny, I have t'ink at de firs' dat red-head she be hones'-man. Yuh say no. Aw right. Den w'y she stay wit' de cavalry? W'at kin' o' chance have she for turn de treeck eef she stay wit' de cavalry?"

"How do yuh know he's still with the cavalry? May-be——"

"Mabbeso yes. I know she ees wit' de cavalry, 'cause I was een de camp un talk wit' de corp'ral, un: I hear de lieut'nant ask heem for ride wit' de troop, un I hear de

major say de same t'ing, un dat red-head she say she glad for ride wit' de troop. Now w'at yuh t'ink?"

The half-breed smiled a triumphant smile and rubbed his rifle-stock with the palm of his hand. Johnny pushed his hat back and scratched a perplexed head.

"I dunno," he said truthfully. "But there's somethin' funny about all this."

"Somet'ing ees all tam funny about dees," concurred Laguerre sweetly, climbing into his saddle.

"But look here, Telescope—" began Johnny, as they rode off.

"I look un I look," interrupted the half-breed, "un I tell yuh, my frien', de more I look de less I see un, I t'ink, by gar, dat ees de way wit' yuh."

"Yuh do, huh?" yapped Johnny, stung in a tender spot. "Well, it ain't, not for a minute. Never think it, old-timer. Just yuh wiggle along with me, an' yuh'll see."

"W'at will I see?" demanded Laguerre.

"Lots," was the somewhat vague reply.

"Mabbe I do un mabbe I do not. Anyway I t'ink I see somet'ing eef I stay here. To-morrow de cavalry un de red-head weel come, un I wan't for see w'at dem bush-w'ackair do. Perhaps dey weel shoot de red-head." Laguerre licked his lips and looked hopeful.

"Yo're crazy," averred Johnny. "There's no hope for yuh, Telescope, not a-tall. I'm the jigger they're after."

"You."

"Li'l ol' me. I'm the hairpin they expected to down when you come along an' natur-ally you was better'n nothin' so they cut down. But it was all more or less an accident—huh? Shore I know it was me. I was in Marysville when Bale Harper an' Tom Keen's there. I light out before daylight an' I look back when I'm some

ways along an' here they come. Yuh know that wash a while back?

"Yeah, that's where I left the trail. Well I'm on a hill watchin' when Harper an' Keen rip down the trail, an' they don't stop at the wash at all, just kept foggin' right along like they knowed where they was a-goin' an' in a hurry to get there, till they scattered round this ridge, picked out their particular rocks, an' lay down to wait. If they'd been *trailin'* me they'd 'a' stopped at the wash an' scouted up an' down to see which way I went. Instead o' that yuh know what they did."

"They must see you track een de trail."

"Guess they did, but I'm figurin' they took 'em for somebody else's, some gent who left town the night before maybe or they'd never 'a' acted the way they did—I tell yuh the stage went by even. They didn't bat their eyes at it. Yuh make me sick, Telescope. I tell yuh I know it was me. I'd shore admire to find out how they knowed I was in town. The judge knowed an' so did Jack Murgatroyd. O' course the judge didn't tell, an' Jack's another clam, an' besides he never did train with that Harper an' Keen outfit anyway.

"Here's a good place for me to leave yuh, Telescope. You can sift up that draw, swing east a ways, an' there y' are at the finest kind o' hill all made to order for lookin' over the landscape. C'mon in to Damson soon's yuh can. Yuh might be needed. So long. Be a good boy an' write home often an' don't forget to say yore li'l prayers."

CHAPTER XX

GOVERNMENT MONEY

ONE store, two saloons, a blacksmith shop, a stage station, four houses, a railroad station, and that graceful structure, a large and dripping water-tank, scattered as though by cheerful chance along the flanks of a large railroad corral, made up the village that was Damson.

Johnny stopped at the trough that the considerate agent had built beneath the water-tank, allowed his horse and himself a sparing drink apiece, and rode to the station.

He stood on the grimy door-sill and surveyed the interior. The agent, a young man with tremendously long legs and a neck to match, sat well down in a wire-trussed chair and slept tunelessly. Johnny forbore to interrupt his snores and crossed to one of the saloons.

"Got any ice?" he demanded of a sweating bartender.

The latter affected to faint. He seized the bar with both hands and gasped.

"Ice! Ice! I done heard that name long, long ago when I was a toddlin' child wearin' aperns an' things, but, stranger, I clean forgot what the word means. Will whisky do?"

"No, gimme a beer."

The beer, washy-looking, almost colourless, was slid in front of him. He picked up the glass, walked out into the shimmering heat that filled the road, and solemnly

poured the tepid liquid on the ground. Which being done he returned to the round-eyed bartender.

"Wanted to see if she'd sizzle," he calmly explained. "She did."

He spun a coin on the bar and retired to the watering-trough and the shade of the water-tank, where he spent a lonely hour. At the end of the hour, the agent, rousing and hungry for human speech, joined him yawnfully.

"It's a wild life," observed Johnny.

"Shore is," agreed the agent. "If hell's any hotter'n this, I'd just as soon stay alive. Yessir, fried my bacon an' part o' myself where I fell down on the rails this mornin'. An' I quit the S. P. an' come up here 'cause New Mexico was too hot!"

The agent laughed at the joke on himself and bit off a large and generous chew from the plug he kept in the crown of his cap. He seemed a guileless railroad man. Johnny wondered.

"Passed a whole troop o' cavalry yesterday," he lied easily. "They was driftin' this way. Goin' to meet the paymaster."

Johnny's gray eyes, the lids half-closed, were watching the agent with electric intentness. The latter stretched languidly and yawned anew and cavernously.

"Goin' to meet the paymaster, huh?" he repeated without interest. "A whole troop. He must be packin' a million dollars. Wish they was more of you an' me," he added wistfully. "I'd like a li'l game."

"So would I, but seein' as we ain't twins, mumblety peg's about our limit."

Knife-flipping did not appeal to the agent, and Johnny soon departed to make friends with the citizenry of Damson.

The following morning Johnny, having exchanged profitless conversation with every inhabitant, was roosting on the agent's spare chair. He wished to be near the agent, whom he did not quite trust. The long-legged young man was thumbing waybills, and Johnny was looking across his bowed shoulders through the open door at the heat waves that danced before the face of the stage station.

And as he drowsily stared the down-stage rolled in and creaked to a halt in front of the station. The passengers, two citizens and a drummer, alighted. Johnny sat up with a jerk and batted unbelieving eyes. For the two citizens were Bale Harper and Tom Keen.

The drummer sat down on a bench beside the door of the store and mopped a bald and shining head. Harper and Keen went into the nearer of the two saloons. It seemed to Johnny that Keen held his right shoulder a trifle stiffly.

Johnny took thought a moment. Then he shoved his hat forward, rose to his feet and crossed the road to the saloon. Harper and Keen were standing at the bar. They did not turn at his entrance. Johnny walked quietly up to Keen and slapped him heartily on the right shoulder. Keen uttered a grunt of pain and whirled like a cat, his right hand dropping to his holster. But his clutching fingers gripped not the smooth wood of the butt. Instead they encountered the back of Johnny's out-flung left hand.

"Whatsa matter?" demanded Johnny, with a grin. "What yuh tryin' to pull a gun on me for? Don't yuh know me?"

"Well, whaja crack me on the shoulder for?" grumbled Keen peevishly.

"Yuh'll have to excuse me," said Johnny with wide, innocent eyes. "I didn't know yore shoulder was sore."

"It ain't," Keen denied hastily. "I don't like folks to be so abrupt, that's all."

Mr. Harper looked his wall-eyed surprise at Johnny's *gaucherie* and nodded curtly in acknowledgment of the stray man's greeting. Johnny, abating his waiting watchfulness not at all, suggested drinks. Mr. Harper and Mr. Keen accepted the invitation. They drank, employing, as etiquette required, their right hands, but Johnny used his left. No one appeared to observe the solecism, even when Johnny repeated it at the next round. At the third round Johnny, pleading a disordered stomach, took a cigar.

Messrs. Harper and Keen, muttering something about seeing Johnny later, went away. Johnny, lounging with his best air of carelessness at a corner window, saw the two enter the store. Later he saw them leave, carrying no visible parcels, and go into the other saloon. Which place, as set forth on a misspelt sign, accommodated travellers. Johnny threw his cigar butt at a transient dog and shuffled dispiritedly across to the store.

"My friend get his liniment all right?" he gloomily asked the storekeeper.

"Liniment!" repeated that worthy. "They didn't get no liniment. They bought cartridges and carbolic salve."

"Salve," Johnny echoed vacantly. "Oh, yeah, yeah, I thought it was liniment—for a hoss. Gimme four bags tobacco, a box o' matches, papers, an' one box o' cartridges, forty-five ninety."

He departed, stuffing his purchases into various pockets, and rejoined the station agent. The railroad man found him a grievously unamusing companion. He could not, of course, be aware that Johnny was speculating as to the proper moment for entering the saloon that accommodated travellers.

Some twenty minutes later Johnny came alive with startling suddenness, slid to his feet, hitched up his chaps, and walked out stiff-legged, his elbows bent. The agent gazed after him in amazement.

"That's shore a funny jigger," he remarked to the relay. "I wonder now is he crazy or somethin'."

Johnny crow-walked to the other saloon. As he went he sang the heartening and well-known ballad, "Buena Vista Battlefield."

"I am her only cherished child,
But tell her that I died
Rejoicin' that she taught me young
To take my country's side."

At the tail of the cheery lines he leaned against the bar, and wagged a solemn forefinger at the bartender.

"But, comrade, there's one more—
She's gentle as a fawn,
She lives upon the slopin' hill
That overlooks the lawn."

He broke off and gravely eyed the bartender.

"That's one sad song," he asserted, grinning widely. "Always makes me feel like I was gettin' over one good drunk. Gimme a see-gar, a good see-gar. Trot out every box yuh got."

There were ten boxes from which to choose, and Johnny was frowning over the selection when Mr. Harper and Mr. Keen passed through on their way to the street. Johnny moved quickly and caught them at the door.

"Been looking for you gents!" he cried amiably. "Have a drink, just to show they's no hard feelin's."

The two men promptly turned about and draped themselves against the bar.

"Name yore calf-killer," invited Johnny, placing himself beside Tom Keen.

Johnny sipped down a scant one finger—a disordered stomach must not be abused—and wrinkled a thoughtful nose. There was about Mr. Keen a distinct and penetrating aroma of carbohc salve. Johnny mentally slapped a swelling chest.

When Messrs. Harper and Keen had gone he bit his cigar and smoked complacently. Somehow the heat was not so oppressive. It was a fine large day, and the pathway through the wilderness was beginning to straighten and shed its obstacles.

At noon came Sheriff Stahl's deputy, Jack Murgatroyd. The silent, swarthy man put his horse in the stage station corral, left his saddle with the station-boss, and spent four unsociable hours sitting on a crate, waiting for Number Six, the east-bound train. When the train arrived, fifty minutes late, the deputy boarded the smoker.

The stamp of hoofs and the squeak and jingle of harness followed the bell-clangour of the departing train. The northbound stage was being hooked up. Johnny strolled casually to where Whisky Jim stood leaning against a wheel, examining the buckskin popper of his long bull-whip.

"Did Bale an' Tom ride with yuh all the way from Marysville, Jim?" inquired Johnny, in a tone that would not have carried twenty feet.

"They did not," replied the driver. "I picked 'em up six mile south o' Bubblin' Creek."

"Kind o' funny place to be afoot—this weather."

"They said their hosses was run off in the night. I

guess—— Aw right, Bill? Say, what'd I tell yuh about a blind bridle on that off leader? Well, that's all right, too. I'm the one that's gotta drive 'em. Next time you use a open one. So long, Johnny."

The stage lurched away northward in a thick cloud of dust. Johnny glanced under his hat brim at the porch of the store. Harper and Keen were sitting on the porch, their heels cocked up on the low railing.

"Now I guess," said Johnny to himself, "they won't find out from Whisky what I asked him—not yet awhile."

The night brought Laguerre and the better part of the bushwhackers' two horses, a tall and rawboned red.

"What did yuh do with the other hoss?" asked Johnny.

"Turn him loose un leave de saddle on de heel aftair I see dem go away een de stage," answered the half-breed. "Bot' dem men here, huh?"

"Shore. An' they're the ones all right. Now listen hard, Telescope. I gotta li'l scheme I wanna work on Bale an' Tom to-morrow. They didn't see yuh sift in, so it'll be a kind o' surprise for 'em. She's thisaway——"

Laguerre listened delightedly. Johnny's little scheme promised sport after his own heart.

In the morning Johnny contrived to eat breakfast with Harper and Keen. Johnny was the first to finish and stood in the doorway looking out upon a dusty world. He heard the scrape of pushed-out chairs, and raised his hand to his hat and held it there a moment. As at a signal Laguerre rode out from behind the chute at the railroad corral. His mount was the tall and raw-boned red, and he was heading toward the hotel. Harper and Keen stepped past Johnny into the open air. They halted with great suddenness and he saw their backs stiffen. Then they started to walk on.

"Wait a shake, gents," he urged quietly. "There's a friend o' mine bringin' up a hoss for you to look at."

Messrs. Harper and Keen stopped and faced Johnny. Harper, blessed with a wall-eye, was enabled to observe without difficulty both Johnny and the approaching rider. Tom Keen stared woodenly at Johnny Ramsay. No one looking at the latter could have surmised that he expected to kill or be killed within the next few minutes. His attitude was easy, his voice a drawl. Chance might well have hooked his thumb in his belt so that the palm of the hand almost touched the butt of the six-shooter.

"I heard yore hosses got run off the other night," Johnny continued in his pleasant voice, "an' Telescope he found this cayuse walkin' the trail by his lonesome right after his own hoss was downed by road agents. Providential, I call it. Shore saved him a long walk or a wait anyway. But I remembered seein' Bale ridin' a hoss like this here one once, so I told Telescope—he remembered, too."

Harper and Keen made no comment. They continued to stare. Johnny made a mental bet with himself that they would go after their guns before Laguerre crossed the street. He lost. Tom Keen raised his arms, locked his hands behind his ears and teetered back and forth on his toes. His eyes left Johnny's face and gazed interestedly upon Laguerre and his mount. Bale Harper cradled his right elbow in the palm of his left hand, gently caressed his stubby chin, and critically focused first one eye and then the other on the half-breed.

Laguerre checked his horse at a distance of ten yards. He smiled between the pony's ears at the two men from Paradise Bend. It was an open smile, and showed most

of the white teeth below the stubby black moustache. But it was not a particularly pleasant smile.

"Mornin'," said Laguerre, his nod barely perceptible. "Johnny say you lose you hoss, Bale. Dees heem?"

"Now," thought Johnny, the fingers of his right hand curling downward ever so slightly.

He meant to shoot through the bottom of his holster. All was in readiness for the climax. But Mr. Harper did not play up. He still caressed his stubby chin. And now he shook his head.

"That ain't my hoss," he declared firmly. "My hoss was a rangy red all right, but his legs was different, an' he was wider between the eyes, an' his tail was longer by five-six inches. I wish he was my hoss," he added regretfully, and moved off, followed by Tom Keen.

"Wouldn't that make yuh sick?" Johnny observed, when he and Laguerre were sitting on a foundation beam beneath the tank. "I shore thought we had 'em."

"She ees sleeck," said the half-breed, and blew smoke through his nostrils. "Guess eet was you heet Tom aftair all—only a small leetle graze. Me, I geet heem good or not a-tall mabbeso."

He smiled at his friend in a way that robbed the words of their sting, and Johnny laughed.

"He ain't hit hard," he admitted. "All the same, I was watchin' him when he put his hands behind his head an' his eyelids wiggled. Hurt him all right. He just done it for hell aimin' to show they wasn't no nicks on him. Guess he must think they ain't no smell to carbolic salve. Whatsa matter?"

Laguerre lifted his lowered head.

"Cavalry comin'," he said.

Men powdered with dust, the horses caked and sweating, the Fort Yardley cavalry rode into Damson with a brave jingle of curbchains and clink of slung carbines. The red-head rode beside the first lieutenant. In the rear the corporal drove his mules. He looked unhappy.

As the troop passed the water-tank the red-head glanced sidewise at Johnny and Laguerre.

"Howdy," he called and smiled and flung up a friendly hand.

The moon-faced major saw them, too, but he gave no sign of recognition. The troop clicked across the rails and made camp in a grove of cottonwoods a quarter-mile beyond.

Johnny and Laguerre looked at each other. Above their heads the windmill that supplied water to the tank squeaked solemnly. At regular intervals it groaned and rattled, but it never stopped while the wind blew. Happy, happy windmill! No cause for it to worry. It had no vexatious problems. All it had to do was whirl and turn and pump day in, day out. . . .

"But the thing can't travel," muttered Johnny.

"Huh?" Laguerre lifted inquiring eyebrows.

"Djuh notice how the red-head didn't pay no attention to Bale an' Tom?" Johnny said hastily. "An' they was sittin' over there in plain sight."

He nodded toward the store. Laguerre grunted and drew a match along the sole of his boot.

"She dunno dem mabbeso," he observed, when his second cigarette was burning well. "I t'ink dat long tam, me."

"There yuh go, tryin' to start a argument," complained Johnny. "Ain't yuh never satisfied? Le's go in an' ride the agent round his collar."

So they went in and devilled the lonely agent, but the amusement palled. Laguerre wandered off to make friends with the cook in the saloon where the traveller was accommodated, and Johnny trundled over to the stage station and helped the station-boss oil harness till the dish-pan clanged for supper.

The next day nothing happened. Nor the next, nor the next, nor the next after that. The cavalrymen loafed in their camp, exercised their mounts, and got drunk on occasion. The red-head hung about town. So did Harper and Keen.

On the sixth day the red-head scraped acquaintance with Harper and Keen. He accomplished this publicly, when Johnny and Laguerre were within a scant five yards. The most unbiased of spectators would have known by the red-head's manner that he had never till that moment so much as heard of Messrs. Harper and Keen.

"He's a fox, that feller," said Johnny, talking it over later with the half-breed. "'Camp's my name,' says he. 'Barry Camp,' says he, 'an' where can a feller pick up a likely bunch o' hosses? an' let's all have a drink an' be sociable'; an' we did an' we was, an' all the time he spread it on thick as plaster on a wall."

"We have watch all t'ree—dey have not talk togedder teel to-day."

"An' yet I'll go yuh fifty to two bits he knowed all about yore brush with them two inside o' twenty-four hours after he pulled in. A likely bunch o' hosses, huh. He didn't say nothin' about no hosses up in Sunset County, not that I knows of. No, he was goin' to Seymour City, he was. Looks like he was shore in a hurry to get there, don't it?"

The red-head continued to remain in Damson. So did

Harper and Keen. Four times a day Laguerre told Johnny that they were wasting their time.

At the end of ten days Johnny began to feel that there might be a basis of fact for Laguerre's statements, but he was too stubborn to admit it. There was wrangling and language.

In the afternoon of the eleventh day the monotony was broken by the red-head riding out with the first lieutenant. Johnny promptly got his horse and trailed them. The pair, riding slowly, fetched an aimless circle round Damson and rode in at dusk.

The following day the manoeuvre was repeated. What lay behind this strange passion for riding with the military? That evening he and Laguerre, arguing the matter, almost quarrelled.

On the thirteenth day the red-head left his horse in the corral and sat with the first lieutenant on the porch of the store. Johnny, perched in sullen loneliness on an empty whisky keg upended in the shade of the station, did not lift his eyes when the stage from the Bend rolled in. He was endeavouring to concentrate on the problem in hand and making a boggy ford of it. His thoughts persisted in reverting to Paradise Bend and two of the inhabitants thereof.

He just knew, so he did, that the gambler was riding with Dorothy every single day. They might even be married by this time. It was a shame. A nice girl like Dorothy certainly deserved a better fate. In after years Slay would probably beat her. He looked like that kind of man, and Johnny had heard him speak very roughly to his sister. Johnny began to get quite worked up about it. Which state of mind was the most serious attack yet.

"If she ain't took him by the time I get back," he told

himself, "I'll settle it. No two ways about it. I'll just make the break an' marry her myself. I've been thinkin' about it long enough. Now I'll do it. Dorothy has gotta be saved."

"What are you muttering about?" asked a laughing voice.

Johnny looked up dazedly into the amused face of Mrs. Wallace. All in dust-coloured silk, a parasol of the same shade and material slanting across her shoulder, she tilted her beautiful chin and laughed at him frankly.

"I've been watching you ever since I stepped out of the stage," she said, shifting the broad black ribbons of a jet-embroidered reticule to the hollow of her arm, "and you've done nothing but nod your head and mutter away at a great rate. Been here long?"

"Ab'bub-bout two weeks," stuttered Johnny, dragging off his hat and getting to his feet.

"Those strayed Flying M horses are the most ambitious animals I ever heard of," she said, the brilliant smile hardening a trifle. "How many miles is it from here to the Dogsoldier?"

"Oh, Scotty's got lots of other jobs besides hosses he sends his men on," parried Johnny. "Yuh'd be surprised," he pursued, warming to his subject, "at the amount of business Scotty has. He's very broad-minded that way."

He put on his hat and beamed upon her, his active brain busily conjecturing as to the reason for her presence. She continued to smile till the smile grew fixed. Then it faded, and her mouth-corners drooped and she sighed.

"I suppose the train's late again," she murmured plaintively. "It always is."

"I'll find out. Which one?"

"Number Six. I'm going to Piegan City."

When he returned with the glad tidings that Number Six, for the first time in many months, was on time, Mrs. Wallace was sitting on the whisky keg. Her glistening silk billowed about her—it was one of those years when skirts were *bouffant* to distraction. Her reticule lay in her lap. Her hands were demurely folded on the handle of her parasol.

"On time? How nice," said she, glancing at a tiny watch. "Then I've only an hour to wait. You may sit there on the softest plank in the flooring and amuse me if you like. I'm bored stiff. I wish I could smoke."

"Everybody's lookin' now," grinned Johnny, "an' they'd all stand on their li'l ears if yuh did."

He sat down cross-legged on the edge of the platform and fished out the makings.

"I'm a-goin' to tantalize yuh," he observed with a smile.

"You do," she told him simply.

"Huh?" He stared, thumb poised in the act of snapping a match alight.

She leaned forward, chin supported on her knuckles, her dark and brilliant eyes holding his.

"I wonder if you know how much," she said softly.

A lieutenant from the cavalry camp, striding round the corner of the building almost fell over the lady. He snatched off his hat and, stammering apology, backed off with hopeful slowness. But the radiant vision on the whisky keg ignored his existence. She continued to gaze upon Johnny.

"I—I dunn——" began Johnny feebly, and stopped and ran a bewildered finger round the inside of his collar.

"I wish you'd be my friend," she persisted wistfully.

"I am!" he assured her hastily, and stood upon his feet.

"Where's yore bag, Mis' Wallace? Y'ain't a-goin' to

Piegan with just that thing?"—he indicated the reticule—"Tell me where it's at, an' I'll get it for yuh."

"I told Whisky Jim to bring it when he finished with his team. He's fetching it now. Do sit down."

Johnny looked at the approaching stage-driver and sat down. Whisky Jim reverently set down the bag at the lady's side, was sweetly thanked, and returned whence he came. Johnny thought he'd better try again.

"I gotta go see Telescope," he announced briskly, and arose.

"Are you afraid of me?" she demanded, and caught her lower lip between her teeth and gazed at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"Why, Mis' Wallace," he exclaimed, with what he intended should pass for a hearty laugh, "why, Mis' Wallace——" He gulped miserably and hitched up his chaps.

"You may call me Lotta—if you like."

"Why—uh—thanks."

"You're welcome."

There was the barest flicker of mirth about her mouth, and then she sighed quite deeply, and looked away from him, and then looked back, and said:

"I need a good, true friend."

Johnny felt the hot and cold blushes skimming the flesh of him. He was horribly uncomfortable and more than a little annoyed. Strange that this should be when in the Bend he had thoroughly enjoyed philandering with Mrs. Wallace. He did not take thought as to the reason. He hadn't time. Mrs. Wallace was speaking.

"I'm in great trouble—Johnny."

The dark eyes begged, appealed. The red lips parted in a tremulous smile. No action could have bettered her pose.

The cavalry lieutenant, furtively watching from a corner of the railroad corral, ground his teeth.

"A lady!" he bumbled to the nearest post. "A lady! Divinity, by gad! hobnobbing with a beastly cowboy! Pearls—pearls before punchers!"

The officer was well out of earshot, of course, and could not be expected to know that Johnny would have delightedly paid real money for the privilege of changing places with him.

"Trouble," repeated Johnny. "Trouble. You tell me who the gent is an' I'll shore make him hard to find."

"Oh, it's not that—that is, not exactly. I—when are you coming back to the Bend, Johnny?"

"I dunno—to-morrow—next week—next month—can't tell."

"So long as that?" The red mouth drooped.

"Well, yuh see——"

"Yes, I know you're awfully busy," she cut in, "but—but I need some one I can trust, and, Johnny, I think I can trust you—I *know* I can trust you. I suppose you think I ought not to bother you," she went on forlornly, her graceful head bent, "that I should go to my brother, but—but brothers don't always understand."

He nodded.

"Whadda yuh want me to do?" he asked, his eyes on the little pulse throbbing in her smooth throat.

"I can't tell you now," she said. "There isn't time. Wait till I come back."

"I may not be here then."

"It doesn't matter. I don't need your help here. I need it in the Bend."

The tiny pulse was beating rapidly. The smooth cheeks

were flushed. There was a pitiful little catch in her voice.

"Whatever you say goes," Johnny told her. "But how'll I know——"

"Oh, I'll tell you in the Bend. I'll tell you everything when you come to see me. And you will come, won't you, just as soon as ever you strike town?"

"Shore will."

"I—I hope you won't regret it." The trouble in the dark eyes was very real.

"I guess I won't," Johnny said easily, thankful for a sudden humming of the rails. "There she comes," he added, and a deep and distant whistle whooped its warning.

Mrs. Wallace stood up. From her silken knees to the ground the jet-embroidered reticule slid, and landed on the planking with a solid thump. The lady stooped, but Johnny was the quicker. He scooped up the reticule and handed it to her. It was surprisingly heavy, that reticule. Johnny did not know that powder-puffs and cold-cream jars hefted like that. The thing weighed ten or twelve pounds at least. Perhaps there was a gun in it. But somehow, when he lifted it, the contents had not the feel of a six-shooter. Besides, a revolver only weighed a light two and a half pounds or so.

Mrs. Wallace took the reticule and thanked him and slipped the broad ribbons over her arm. Johnny picked up her bag. And the bag was heavy, too. True, it was a generous bag, broad and long and high, but even so. . .

With a clanging grind and squeal of wheels and brakes the long eastbound pulled in. Johnny saw Mrs. Wallace into the Pullman, handed her bag to the porter and hopped off as the train started. But, changing his mind on the instant, he hopped on again. He calmly made his swaying

way through four day-coaches to the smoker, where he hunched down in an empty seat and watched the scenery drift by.

"She ain't a-goin' to Piegan City for the trip," he told himself. "I'd shore admire to know what made them bags so heavy."

It was night when the train clanked across the switches of Piegan City's four sidetracks. Johnny dropped off the smoker as the engine slid past the section-house, and was standing beside a pile of ties beyond the range of the station lights when the train stopped.

He watched Mrs. Wallace descend from the Pullman and go into the express office, followed by the porter with her bag. Johnny sauntered across the tracks to the platform outside the express office and sat down on a hand-truck. Through an open window he could see the express office and all that went on therein.

He saw the bag lying on the counter. He saw Mrs. Wallace open first the bag and then the reticule, take from the former six, and from the latter two little square packages, and slide them across the counter to the express agent. The man made out a receipt, handed it to Mrs. Wallace, and carried the eight packages to the safe, and twirled the combination on them. The lady picked up her bag and crossed the street to the hotel.

"They's money or dust in them eight li'l boxes," concluded Johnny. "That's what made the two bags so heavy. They's a Wells-Fargo office in the Bend. From the Bend here is one long trip for a lady. Puzzle—find the joker."

Johnny stretched out his legs and looked about him. Beyond the hotel, between a drugstore and the Star Saloon a transparency proclaimed the presence of a restaurant.

But he wasn't very hungry yet, not so hungry as he would be later. He decided to wait.

While he waited, the telegraph operator—he was likewise the station agent—the yellow envelope of a telegram in his hand, flat-footed across to the Star and pushed through the swinging doors. He came out almost immediately and returned to his duties. Johnny heard him shifting boxes and cases in the freight shed.

A man came out of the Star Saloon and went into the hotel. And the man was no stranger. He was that sharp-faced citizen of Paradise Bend, Bale Harper's brother Spill.

"S'funny," muttered Johnny. "S'funny. What's he doin' here?"

He considered it even funnier when, within five minutes, Spill emerged from the hotel doorway with another man, the lean and craggy ex-station-boss, Skinny Devinney. The two parted in front of the Star, Spill to enter the saloon Skinny to cross to the station. After a time Johnny heard him ask, above the complaining of the skinned wood, that the agent "Send this now." A box dropped with a crash, and there was silence in the freight shed. From the office came the staccato clicking of the sounder. Johnny wished he could read Morse.

"That's one odd number," he said to himself. "Skinny sendin' telegrams."

Skinny strolled from the office and walked scufflingly back to the Star. Johnny continued to occupy his truck and ruminate on the strangeness of life.

Came Number Five with a flaring Cyclopean eye and rows of lighted windows and a whiff of cooking food from the diner's kitchen that made Johnny really hungry. When Number Five was gone away westward Johnny betook himself to the restaurant. But before entering

the place he removed his six-shooter from his holster, shoved it down inside the waistband of his trousers and carefully pulled down his vest over the protruding butt.

For there was a marshal in Piegan City, a curious person with notions about the masses not wearing firearms in public, notions he was more than willing to uphold with enthusiasm and both his guns. Johnny was always glad to please a marshal—when it did not interfere with business. In this case Johnny could see himself handing his gun across the bar of the nearest saloon. With Spill and Skinny and Lord knew who-all infesting the landscape, he could indeed.

He made an excellent meal in the restaurant, then went out and stood on the sidewalk, wondering what to do next.

"I could 'a' gone back on Number Five," he grumbled. "I might as well, too. I don't guess that Lotta is goin' to do anythin'."

At this juncture the lady herself issued from the hotel and walked along the sidewalk toward him. Johnny did not particularly care whether Skinny or Spill saw him, but he decidedly did not wish to have Mrs. Wallace know that he had followed her. He modestly withdrew to the deep shadows between two buildings. Mrs. Wallace passed without seeing him and entered the drugstore. Johnny went across to the station and his hand-truck.

Whoo-up! The whistle came from the west. By its shrillness he judged it to be the whistle of a freight engine. It was. And the freight engine, one of those speedy moguls, was pulling a short train of twenty cars of sheep for the Chicago stock yards.

"Woolies," sniffed Johnny, turning up a scornful nose at the blatting pests.

The mogul stopping for water, and the train being a short one, the caboose ground to a standstill opposite where Johnny was sitting. Before the wheels ceased to turn a frock-coated man hurried down the caboose steps and into the station. Johnny took a long breath and expelled it slowly.

"They'll all be here soon," he murmured. "Who's next?"

The new arrival was the owner of the Broken Dollar, and there was wrath in the way he swung his shoulders. Johnny arose and edged toward the door of the waiting-room. He was barely in time to hear the station-agent say, "I think the lady went to the hotel," when Slay strode through the doorway and, without looking to the right or left, made his purposeful way to the hotel.

"He's shore all het up over somethin'," said Johnny, peering across the platform of the caboose. "Yessir, he's one mad man, that feller."

Slay came out of the hotel quicker than he went in. Coat-tails flying he hurried, up the street to the drugstore. He entered, emerging a few minutes later with Mrs. Wallace. The two walked off together down the street. Their progress was slow, for Mrs. Wallace dawdled.

"Gettin' madder an' madder," observed Johnny. "See him stamp his foot."

It was obvious that the gambler was in a fine temper. He took a cigar from his pocket, bit the end, then promptly flung away the cigar, and jammed his hands deep down in his trousers pockets.

Mrs. Wallace made as if to turn in at the doorway of the hotel, but her brother caught her by the elbow and said something that Johnny could not catch. The two walked on down the street. In this direction lay the Y

track and the sidings, where stood strings of boxes and gondolas.

"I don't like the look o' that?" said Johnny. "He's mad—an' bad."

Johnny thoughtfully slid round the tail of the caboose, and walked down the track toward the sidings. He dodged in behind a box car and, crouching, looked between the wheels toward Main Street. Those two figures dark against the scattered lights—there they were. They were still coming in his direction. Now they had stopped—now they were coming on. They had stopped again. Their voices were only a murmur. He wished they would come closer.

They didn't, so he tiptoed toward them, feeling his way along the edge of the box car. The slag ballast was crunchy, but he was careful. He negotiated the length of three cars, two boxes and a gondola, and dared go no farther. He could hear quite well, anyhow.

"It is mine to do with as I choose," the lady was saying.

"We'll talk about that later," averred Slay. "You were trying to go away—that's what you were trying to do."

"If I'd meant to do that, I wouldn't have been satisfied merely to try—I'd have done it. You simpleton, do you suppose I'd stop here and wait for you to catch me! Honestly, at times I believe you think you possess all the brains in the family."

"You were going to leave me." The man was doggedly insistent.

"I wasn't." Impatiently.

"You were. You're lying."

A pause. Then:

"That's the first time you ever said that to me."

"I'll say more than that to you if I feel like it. You're coming back with me to-morrow."

"Am I?"

"You are."

"Are you holding my arm to make sure? You hurt. Let go, or I'll slap you!"

He evidently did not let go, for almost instantly somebody's face was slapped—hard. Followed then the stinging crack of another smack, a choked scream, and the soft thump of a fallen body. The next moment, Slay, bending over Mrs. Wallace, saw a great light and strange constellations as he was knocked flat by a smashing blow on the back of the head. For him the great light and the constellations were but momentary. They vanished and black unconsciousness took their place before his forehead struck the ground.

Johnny returned to his waistband the gun with whose long barrel he had rapped the gambler, and stepped over the sprawling legs to Mrs. Wallace. The lady was sitting up, supporting herself on her arm. Her hat was over one ear. Her black hair was pulled loose across her white forehead. Slowly she lifted a hand and felt of her cheek.

"He struck me," she whispered. "He struck me."

Johnny slipped his hands under her armpits.

"Get up," he said, and pulled her to her feet.

She twisted, swaying, in his arms, and looked into his face.

"How—how did you get here?" she demanded hysterically, her hands clutching the flannel of his sleeves.

"I just come," he told her, "an' a good thing, too."

She dropped on her knees beside her brother, felt of his heart and listened to his laboured breathing.

"How badly is he hurt?" she asked.

"He'll come to in maybe half an hour or so," answered Johnny, feeling with untender fingers the good-sized bump on Slay's head. "I didn't hit him hard as I could. He's all right. Don't you worry about him. It's yoreself yuh gotta be thinkin' of." Again he slipped his hands under her armpits and set her on her feet. "Now you get a grip on yore nerve an' go back to the hotel. No use yore bein' around when he comes to. An' to-morrow you hit the grit out o' here—east for choice, the farther the better. I'll fix it so's he won't try to stop yuh."

"Yuh needn't," she said and shook her dishevelled head.

"Why, I thought——" he began.

"I suppose so. How long were you listening?"

"I told yuh I just come. 'Sno use talkin' about it. I'll fix——"

"I said you needn't, once. I'm returning to the Bend to-morrow—with him."

"But——"

"I know. He accused me of lying and then struck me. Humiliating, I admit. I don't think he'll do either again."

"Yuh'd better go, ma'am—east, or south, or west. It don't matter, so yuh go. It'll be healthier, yuh hear me tellin' yuh."

"Why will it be healthier—because of possible beatings?"

"Not exactly. Because—— Look here, you take my word an' skip out on Number Six to-morrow."

She gave him a long, steady look.

"What have I done?" she asked quietly.

"I dunno nothin' about yuh—not a thing. I don't wanta know. I've told yuh all I'm aimin' to tell yuh. If yo're a-goin' back to the Bend with him to-morrow yuh'd

better go to the hotel an' get some sleep. I'd kind o' square up my hat an' push the hair out o' my eyes first, if I was you. No use havin' them fellers in the hotel think anythin'."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, her fingers busy with her hair.

"I'm a-goin' to have a li'l talk with him."

"Is that all?"

"Shore."

"Do you give me your word that's all you mean to do?"

"That's a funny question to ask."

"Do you?"

"If it'll do yuh any good I'll give yuh my word it's all I mean to do now—to-night."

"Now—to-night! Why do you specify to-night?"

"Because in this country yuh never know what'll happen to-morrow. I never like to make promises more'n twenty-four hours ahead. You run along now an' be happy. He won't be asleep much longer."

"I guess I'll stay," she told him stubbornly. "I'll—I'll take what comes."

He stared at her helplessly. It is a sufficiently difficult thing to instruct a man in the proper treatment of a sister even when that sister is not within sight and hearing. He might in the process be compelled to throw a gun on the gambler. Why couldn't she be reasonable and go? He scowled down at her and wondered what to do.

From the station then came a faint shout. Johnny saw the operator dash out and sprint across the tracks, yelling at every jump. He was not yelling yells either. He was saying something, and it sounded like:

"Hold-up!"

"You can stay with him if yo're a mind to," he told her

crossly. "If yuh don't wanna lemme talk to him, all right, I won't. I'm goin' to see what's up."

He ran toward the lights of Main Street and pushed into the Star Saloon. There was an excited crowd in the Star. It centred about the operator, and everybody was talking at once.

"Diamond, huh?—How much?—Anybody downed?—Fifty thousand dollars!—Number Five—Where's the sheriff? How many men? Had pack-hosses shore—Betcha it's that Fort Creek County gang. Nicked the paymaster, huh? Fifty thousand of Gov'ment money is one man's-size haul!"

Thus the Piegan citizens *ad lib.*

CHAPTER XXI

TELEGRAMS

THE engineer of Number Five, the flyer that had passed through Piegan City just before Johnny went to his supper, had seen the board set against him at Diamond, a siding and demounted box-car station sixty miles west of Piegan City. Thereupon he had stopped his train had been incontinently boarded by armed, masked men who had uncoupled the mail-, express-, and baggage-cars from the remainder of the train, and forced him to haul the three cars a mile farther into a deep cut.

Incidentally this business was not accomplished without bloodshed, the army paymaster being badly wounded. At the cut there was more trouble. The robbers put too much dynamite in the charge they employed for shattering the door of the baggage-car and blew the baggage-man to pieces with his car and many trunks.

Then they were more careful and used a lighter charge in attacking the express-car. They blew in the end and side doors simultaneously and shot the fighting messenger and one of the paymaster's guards to pieces and badly wounded the other guard.

Then they had taken the sacks containing the government money and three other sacks consigned to Sun River and, after rooting awhile among the widely scattered bits of baggage, departed five horsemen and six pack-horses, toward the south.

Débris from the wrecked baggage-car covered the line so thickly that the engine could not back through it, so the fireman ran all the way to Diamond. It is to be presumed he ran quickly. Arriving with his story he found the demoralized train crew searching for the telegraph operator.

They finally found him, gagged, bound with strips torn out of his own trousers, lying in the brush behind the station. On releasing him it was learned that the wires had been cut. Not only that, they had been cut in two places, and the lengths between removed. But the operator was an ingenious person. He strapped on his climbing irons, cut a length from a commercial wire and repaired the break in the railroad wire. Such was the story of the Diamond hold-up gleaned in disjointed scraps by Johnny in the Star Saloon.

Johnny was of the opinion that it was the work of the Fort Creek County outfit, and he did not believe that they would ride south very far. They would double back within a few hours, if not sooner.

Johnny looked speculatively at the men in the saloon. Jack Murgatroyd, popping up from nowhere, was helping the local deputy organize a posse. Spill Harper and Skinny Devinney were raucously to the fore. They would ride in the posse, y'betcha. It was with a smooth brow but an exceedingly wrinkled mind that Johnny nodded to the two men. The nod they accorded him was equally brief. He thought he detected in Skinny Devinney's eyes a startled look, but he could not be sure. Jack Murgatroyd pushed his way to Johnny's side.

"Comin' with us, Johnny?" he asked. "They've wired for an engine an' box-cars for our hosses. We'd ought to be at Diamond in less'n two hours."

"I ain't got a hoss," said Johnny.

"I'll get yuh one."

"All right." Indifferently.

Jack Murgatroyd went out and up the street. Johnny went out and across the tracks. He wanted to be alone and think. The hand-truck was his seat for the next twenty minutes. Then he went into the station. The operator was alone. Piegan City was busy with its posse.

"Shore is a fright what them hold-ups are doin'," he observed, leaning against the ticket window.

The operator agreed profanely.

"It's none o' my business, stranger," continued Johnny, "but would yuh mind tellin' me where that telegram went yuh sent awhile back—the one that skinny feller wrote, Skinny Devinney's his name?"

The operator stared.

"We're not allowed——" he began.

"I know all that," nodded Johnny, "but I got one good reason for askin'. Can't yuh guess?"

The operator was fairly quick-witted.

"There wasn't anything in that telegram," he told Johnny. "It was only about some stock, cattle, that's all."

"Wasn't it sent to Diamond?" persisted Johnny. "Knowed it," he added when the operator nodded. "Who got it?"

"Say, who are you?"

"Me, I'm just a stranger in a strange land, but I'm a heap interested in this li'l hold-up. I wish you was."

The operator hesitated.

"This is against the rules," he said after a short minute. "I'd lose my job if it got out, but I'm willing to take a chance on you. The telegram was addressed to Moses

Peters at Diamond, and it read: 'Ship five cows to-day.' He signed it 'Devinney.'"

"About ten minutes before he sent it didn't a man named Harper get a telegram, an' didn't that telegram come from Damson?"

"You know quite a lot."

"Didn't it?"

"Yep, and it said: 'Lost five hundred dollars. Send money to-day.' It was signed 'Barry Camp.'"

Johnny, pondering hard and rapidly, went out on the platform and saw Slay and Mrs. Wallace going into the hotel. Slay's walk was uncertain. Johnny smiled slightly but his face sobered almost at once.

"Li'l fool," he said to himself, "why couldn't she be sensible an' take a man's warnin'. I wonder if she'll tell him who hit him."

Probably she wouldn't, but if she did, Johnny was ready, very ready. He had been ready a long time.

When the wired-for engine and the box-cars arrived, the sheriff of Piegan County, a long person named Stevens, came with them. The horses of the posse were loaded aboard the two box-cars at the railroad chute, the members climbed into the caboose, and the train pulled out.

At two o'clock in the morning they were unloading their horses at Diamond. The Pullmans and day-coaches of Number Five still stood before the tiny station. Disconsolate and peevish passengers—none of them had been robbed, but passengers are never satisfied—roamed aimlessly about.

The wrecking train from the west was not due for three hours, the operator told Johnny, and the wrecked express-car and the mail-car, blocked by the haggled remains of the

baggage-car, were still where they were at the time of the accident.

Johnny was glad of these things. While the posse crowded close and listened to Sheriff Stevens and Jack Murgatroyd fire questions at the fagged operator, Johnny oozed quietly to one side, got his horse, and rode westward along the tracks.

He had not proceeded three hundred yards when he was overtaken by another member of the posse, an elderly citizen with a bushy white beard and eyes that looked sleepy but were not.

"Guess I'll traipse along with you, Mister Ramsay," announced the other. "Bill Stevens is all right, but he shore likes to gas. Last year I lost forty head o' stock 'cause Bill he done more talkin' than ridin'. Jack Murgatroyd looks good."

There was the faintest emphasis in the world placed on the word "looks."

"Bein' a deputy ain't no cinch," defended Johnny.

"It seems to be in Fort Creek County," observed the elderly citizen. "Leastawise, whadda they do? Hold-ups alla time."

"This one o' that outfit's jobs?" queried Johnny.

"Whadda you think?"

"I think they headed south 'cause they was goin' north or northwest."

"You'n' me seem to think alike. Guess maybe yuh'll find them five road agents in Fort Creek some'ers—if yuh do find 'em."

The elderly citizen's name was Harmer. He and a friend owned a ranch two days' ride east of Piegan City. Just luck his being in town and so in a position to go with the posse, he had confided to Johnny during the ride from

Piegan City. Now he went on to speak of his friend, said friend being mine-crazy, ever neglecting the ranch to go on prospecting trips.

"He's up there in Fort Creek County now," said Harmer "scoutin' round for his mine, the mine that'll make us both millionaires. I'd rather make my millions out o' cattle. But don't yuh get the idea Tom Lander ain't all right," he added loyally. "It's just he's got a notion about mines, an' outside o' that he's a human bein' an' my friend, an' nobody's a-goin' to say anythin' again' him while I'm around."

Harmer gazed truculently at Johnny, and the latter nodded sympathetically. He understood. A man with friends must of necessity put up with a great deal.

The two men were halted fifty yards from the cars by a voice, a nervous voice with quavers in it.

"You come any closer," the voice assured them, "and I'll shoot."

"Don't do it," called Harmer. "We ain't movin'."

"Whatsa matter with you?" demanded Johnny. "We belong to the posse. Who are yuh, anyway?"

But the voice refused to be comforted no matter what was said and kept them standing till the east lightened and it was day. Then Johnny and Harmer saw, framed in the end doorway of the mail-car, two white-faced mail-clerks each holding one of those viciously lethal weapons known as riot-guns.

"When yo're quite satisfied we ain't aimin' to rustle the mail," cried Johnny with some heat, "yuh might point them howitzers of yores another way. We come up here for evidence, an' we ain't got all the time they is. Every minute the road agents are gettin' farther away."

"I tell you one thing, gents," the petulant Harmer broke

in, "if yuh wasn't workin' for Uncle Sam I'd 'a' argued with yuh. I don't care nothin' a-tall about bein' held up thisaway. Yo're damightyful ready with yore guns now," he added pointedly.

"We didn't dare open the doors when we were held up," defended the taller of the two clerks. "We barricaded 'em, and we couldn't shoot through 'em, could we?"

"Shore not, yuh might 'a' got shot doin' it," grinned Johnny. "Now, if you two fellers don't mind I'm a-goin' to scout round a few."

"Round the cars?" asked Harmer.

"Yep, an' I wish yuh'd sort o' trail along an' see what I do. Might need a witness some time."

Harmer nodded and they dismounted and walked toward the two cars. As they went Johnny scanned closely the ditches on either hand. The two mail-clerks watched them, their expressions a grotesque blend of doubt and curiosity. Neither Johnny nor Harmer paid them the slightest attention.

When the two reached the mail-car they stepped down into the left-hand ditch. In this ditch, about twenty feet from the end of the express-car, Johnny found three spent shells. Near the gaping, splintered side-doorway of the express-car he picked up five more. Scattered here and there along the ditch, or caught in the side of the cut, he found many others. In all, when he and Harmer returned to the end of the mail-car and the two clerks, there were twenty-eight spent shells in Johnny's pockets.

"Where's the wounded guard?" asked Johnny.

"Took him west on the engine. He needed a hospital."

Johnny nodded and went back to his horse. Harmer followed slowly. He was trying to build himself a cigarette, and that cut was filled with breeze.

Forty feet in advance, Johnny, his eyes on the ground, saw the corner of a small package protruding beneath a broken fish-plate. Johnny halted and knelt on one knee. To the watching mail-clerks it looked as if Johnny were fastening a loosened spur-strap. When Johnny stood up and walked on the small package was in the inner pocket of his vest. When the rancher joined him Johnny was sorting into two neat piles the spent shells he had collected. One pile, the larger, he put into the pockets of his trousers.

"Yuh like to play solitaire, don't yuh?" observed Harmer, his old eyes quizzical.

"When she's all yuh know yuh gotta like it," was Johnny's ambiguous reply.

"Here comes the posse," said Harmer, squinting east.

"An' they'll be full o' questions. Yore Mister Stevens——"

"Don't call him mine. I never lost the gent."

"Well, anyhow, it's the questions. Maybe they'll want to know did we find any shells. Maybe they'll want to look at them shells. Yuh seen how I divided 'em?"

"I got eyes."

"Then they's plenty shells in that saddle-pocket for them to worry about. No sense in lettin' on too much—now."

"I dunno what yo're drivin' at, Mister Ramsay," said the elderly Mr. Harmer, "but whatever it is, hop to it. Me, I'm a clam."

The posse arrived. The sheriff was much upset, even as Johnny had expected, for that he could find no spent shells. Johnny gladdened his heart by turning over the twenty-one shells in the saddle-pocket.

"All forty-five nineties," said Stevens, "an' that's a

right common size. We'll label 'em 'Exhibit A' at the trial."

Several of the posse were observed to smile. It seemed that the sheriff's well-known passion for detail was not always appreciated by his fellows. Followed then much questioning of the mail-clerks, after which the trail of the robbers and their pack-animals was picked up and the chase begun.

The sheriff was of the opinion that the law-breakers were outlaws from the south and that they were heading for the breaks of the Lost Soldier Mountains. Jack Murgatroyd faintly subscribed to this view. He wasn't sure himself. Bill might be right. Guessed, after all, maybe he was. But Spill Harper and Skinny Devinney were positively blatant in their endorsement of the sheriff's judgment.

A mile or two on the way Johnny, having with meticulous forethought removed and concealed his spurs before the arrival of the posse, recalled having left them in the station at Diamond.

"Them spurs cost forty bucks," he remarked loudly, "an' I wouldn't lose 'em for a whole lot. Guess I'll sift back an' get 'em. See yuh later, Sheriff."

Johnny jerked his horse round and started for Diamond at a gallop. Half way there he slowed to a walk and took from his pocket the small package he had picked up on the track. The square, heavy little parcel was wrapped in thick manila paper. In size and shape it resembled greatly one of the packages Mrs. Wallace had given the Piegan City express-agent. Dirt and grease blotted out both the address and the name of the consignor. Johnny scratched lightly with a finger-nail but merely succeeded in more thoroughly griming the wrapper.

He stopped his horse and carefully unwrapped the package. Under the heavy outer covering was an inner wrapping of light duck doubled and tied with thick tape. He untied the tape and unrolled the duck. The sunlight shone dully on a heaping double handful of coarse gold-dust.

"They's no knowin' where you come from," he said with narrowed eyes. "Nor where yo're a-goin'," he added.

He rewrapped the dust, put it away in the inner pocket of his vest, and untwisted the reins from his saddle-horn.

"Get a-goin', hoss," said he. "Get a-goin'."

Arriving at the box-car station he was confronted by what appeared at first glance to be a generously whiskered gnome in knee-breeches. The apparition turned out to be a passenger's child who was amusing himself by wearing a false beard.

Johnny anchored his startled horse to the rusty link in the coupling at one end of the box-car station and went inside. The operator was sound asleep. He was not pleased at being awakened.

"I know," said Johnny soothingly, "I shore hate to wake yuh up, an' yuh need sleep, but she's a case o' must. Is Moses Peters a reg'lar shore-'nough inhabitant of these parts?"

"Is that what yuh woke me up for?" The operator's voice was peppery.

"Now, now, do-on't get excited."

The brown hand on the operator's shoulder had a most persuasive grip. The man behind the gray eyes was pleasant enough, but . . .

"Well, what about Moses Peters?" the operator said more equably.

"Does he live around here?"

"No, he's a stranger."

"Know where he does live?"

"No. I said he was a stranger."

"Know him again if yuh saw him?"

"Sure. He was an old gent with bushy white whiskers."

"Like Harmer's—I mean the old fellah that rode with the posse."

"Nothin' like his. This jigger's beard was cut square across."

"Square across!" repeated Johnny, and dashed out of the station.

He returned presently leading the gnome by the arm. The gnome was greatly affrighted and unceasingly squealed that he had done nothing.

"Where did yuh get them whiskers?" demanded Johnny.

"I didn't steal 'em, mister! Honest I didn't! I found 'em—found 'em lyin' under a bush out there! I didn't know they was yours."

Hastily the gnome snatched off his facial adornment and forced it upon Johnny. The latter gave the passenger's child a dollar.

"Don't be scared, sonny. Yo're all right, an' I wouldn't scare yuh for nothin'. Lemme try 'em on."

Holding the whiskers in place he turned to the agent.

"Might these belong to Mose?" he asked.

"They're a ringer for Mose's," replied the operator.

"I'll just take 'em with me," said Johnny, and stuffed the false beard into his hip pocket. "See yuh later. Sonny, howdja like to earn another dollar, huh? Yuh would? All right. Show me now where yuh found yore ticklers."

The passenger's child led Johnny to a bush a hundred yards north of the right of way.

"Here's where I found it," said he. "It was lyin' right there."

He pointed to the ground. Certainly there were the marks of high cowboy heels in the vicinity of the bush. Johnny cast about in various directions and within an hour found where eleven horses had stood for some time—four or five hours he thought.

Johnny returned to the box-car. Again he was forced to arouse the operator. But this time the man was more approachable.

"I take it Mose Peters come here for his telegram," said Johnny.

"Naturally. We don't deliver from this station."

"Was Mose waitin' when the telegram came?"

"Waitin'! Why, say, stranger, that old feller's been spendin' all his mornin's and evenin's round here for the last two weeks. He sure wanted that telegram."

"I guess he must 'a'," said Johnny Ramsay. "What for a hoss did he ride?"

"Rode a mare, a black-tailed dun. Vicious devil. Kicked like a steer. He had to tie her with a rope."

"A *black-tail* dun! A black-tail *dun*!"

Here was luck. Johnny could have whooped for joy. Instead he wrote rapidly on a telegraph blank. Two minutes later the operator was clicking off Johnny's request to the cavalry major at Damson that he arrest Barry Camp at once as an accessory to the hold-up of Number Five.

"I dunno whether 'accessory' means what I think it does, but I'm takin' a chance," he told the operator. "Yuh might tack on I'm a-comin' with evidence. Guess that oughta cinch it. Hafta take a chance on that Damson agent," he added to himself. "I dunno, I guess he's straight."

The operator had the telegram repeated and turned to Johnny with awe-struck eyes.

"Howdja find it out?" he asked.

"I was always good at conundrums," bragged Johnny. "Easiest thing I do. If they's an answer comes I'll be back later."

He went out and, to the amazement of several passengers and the Pullman conductor, did a neat double-shuffle in the dust.

"It's a wild life, old-timer," he remarked cheerfully to a fat passenger. "You hadn't ought to eat so much—not in this weather."

The fat passenger shrank back in alarm, and Johnny vaulted into his saddle without touching the stirrup. He jumped the pony into full gallop on the instant, leaving the fat passenger to make oration as to what he would have done had the ruffling cowboy persisted in his impertinence.

Johnny rode to the spot where the eleven horses had stood. From here he worked back over the way they had come. It was difficult, because in stretches there was a deal of short grass. He wished for Laguerre.

Early in the afternoon he came upon his goal, the camp of the five men. It was set far back at the very end of a blind cañon having an abundance of wood, grass, and water.

"Nothin' mean about them," said Johnny. "All the pleasures of home. An' it's shore a heap out of the way. Wiser than owls, ain't they? I guess yes."

He laughed silently, turned his horse on a nickel and headed for Diamond.

"Quite a trail," he said aloud. "Camp to Spill, Spill to Skinny, an' Skinny to Mose Peters an' his black-tail dun—an' Harry Slay, if I can prove it on him."

Here Johnny experienced a severe twinge of compunction for that corraling would doubtless involve the gambler's sister. He did not wish any harm to come to Mrs. Wallace. He did not love her in the least, but she was a woman and remarkably pretty and deserved better things of life than arrest and imprisonment.

"She's in it—the luck! She's bound to be." Johnny pettishly whacked his saddle-horn with the butt of his quirt and called Slay every evil name he could think of for dragging his sister into the mess. "She'd never 'a' done nothin' only for him," he gloomily told his horse. "An' of course, bein' a woman, she has to stick by darlin' brother. Maybe after she's had a night to think it over," he added, brightening slightly, "she'll do what I told her."

There was no long line of passenger-cars at Diamond when Johnny rode in. The wrecking train had come and gone. Far in the east sounded the shrill whistle of a west-bound freight. He dismounted and stripped the saddle and bridle from his horse and turned him loose.

"Kind o' look after this truck," he said to the operator, dropping the saddlery in a corner. "I've hobbled the horse. Guess he won't stray far. If he muddies up yore spring jerk rocks at him. When the posse sifts in tell the sheriff I had to go home."

He didn't tell the operator that he expected to return soon. No sense in telling these railroad employees too much. With a fairly light heart he boarded the caboose of the westbound freight.

He swung off the steps at Damson in the twilight. Laguerre met him.

"W'ere yuh been?" demanded the half-breed. "I t'ink yuh was los' mabbeso. W'y yuh go 'way?"

"Tell yuh later, Telescope. Did the major arrest Camp all right?"

"Arrest heem? Naw, she deed not. Camp was ride 'way north wit' Bale un Tom dees aftairnoon. W'y she arrest heem? W'at you find out. W'at about de hold-up at Diamon'?"

"Plenty. Just now I wanna see that agent."

Johnny descended upon the station-agent and asked questions. Yes, the telegram for the major had been received correctly, and one of the soldiers had taken it over to the camp. Johnny, not yet wholly reassured as to the agent's honesty, fled to the saloon for his saddle and bridle.

"Damfool boy," muttered Laguerre, staring after him. "All tam hurry, hurry. Wondair w'at she know about dat hold-up. She know all right."

He slowly went across to the corral where Johnny was now cinching up. "See yuh later," was all Johnny would say, and he dashed off.

Three minutes later the major, watching his men break camp, was shocked by the tumultuous arrival of a horseman. He did not like this wild-riding person. It was the man who had made game of him, the stray man Ramsay. The officer's eyes glittered coldly.

"What do you mean by riding into a camp in this fashion?" he barked in his parade voice. "What do yuh mean by it? Here, corporal——"

"Throw me out if yuh want," said Johnny, "but first tell me if yuh got my telegram?—Yuh, did, huh. Then why didn't yuh arrest Barry Camp? What did yuh let him get away for?"

"I'm not taking orders from a civilian," snapped the major.

"Oh, yo're not, huh? Well, lemme tell yuh one o' the

mainsprings o' this hold-up bunch has sloped because yuh wouldn't take orders from a civilian. I got the evidence, an' it leads straight back to this man Camp."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

The major hesitated, then he motioned Johnny to dismount.

"Come into my tent," he said, and Johnny followed.

"Tell me—" began the major, but Johnny was already doing it.

He told the major of the telegrams and Moses Peters and his false whiskers, but he said nothing of the dun horse.

"Look at them two telegrams," Johnny almost wailed. "'Five' an' 'to-day' in both of 'em. What else does it mean but 'the paymaster's comin' on Number Five to-day'? It's as plain as a sergeant's stripes."

"But I don't see——"

"I'll begin at the beginning so yuh'll see how I've worked it out. This Camp man knowed there was goin' to be a big pay-day at Fort Yardley, but he dunno when. All right, he goes an' warns the colonel the road-agents are plannin' to bushwhack the paymaster on the trail. The colonel called out a whole troop for a escort an' sent 'em to the railroad. Instead o' takin' along the ambulance like yuh always do for the paymaster, yuh hire a buck-board in the Bend, so's people won't guess nothin'. It works fine and dandy—not. It just shows the paymaster is comin' right soon.

"By hangin' round an' pickin' up a word here an' there—I dunno how much, but you can be shore he got it out of you an' yore two lieutenants some way—the red-head found out what train an' day the paymaster was due on. The rest is easy. All he has to do is send a fake telegram,

an' who'd be the wiser? I'm tellin' yuh, Major, if I hadn't just happened to be in Piegan City, an' seen certain things to make me suspicious an' ask questions, no one would be the wiser. An' you let him go! You had him roped an' you let him go! Honest, Major, if she wasn't so serious I'd laugh. I shore would."

The moon-faced major, who should have known enough to keep his trouble to himself, lifted up his voice and swore. He saw the whole affair with an appalling clarity of vision, and it hurt him to the depths of his being. He was like unto the dog upon whose tail the heavy foot has trod. He wished to talk of his anguish, and he did.

He called in his lieutenants and talked to them. Needless to say he blamed them severely for their loose tongues. The first lieutenant was not one to take a lacing lying down, and he talked back. It was a painful scene. Johnny departed when the major began to threaten the first lieutenant with arrest.

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT DOROTHY SAID

I WEEL not! I tell yuh, Johnny, I weel not go to Marysville for de warrant un let yuh go after Speel un Skeeny. I go wit' yuh." Laguerre scowled across the room at his friend, who was sitting in the middle of his cot hugging his knees."

"Have it yore own way," said Johnny. "I've seen mules now an' then, but of course we wasn't talkin' of mules, was we? Lordy, listen to her rain! We could be trailin' that red-head jigger now if it wasn't for the rain. I dunno what luck is any more. Sling us a match, will yuh, Telescope?"

"Dere y'are. Nevair you min' about Meestair Camp. She weel come latair. Jus' now eet ees Speel un Skeeny—un jus' now I wan' for sleep. Dat train she pull out een t'ree hour."

The rain had stopped when the two got off the train at Diamond. Johnny's Piegan City mount was busily cropping grass in the neighbourhood of the spring. Johnny caught him up and rode to a small ranch five miles west to hire a horse for Laguerre. He was back in an hour and a half with the horse and a supply of food.

In the first of the morning light they were riding southward on the trail of Stevens's posse.

"Dead or alive, the notice said." Johnny's mouth was a straight line.

"Two t'ousand dollar apiece," chimed in Laguerre, his black eyes bright with anticipation.

In all justice it must be said the the half-breed was thinking not so much of the money as he was of the lively excitement he was riding into. Harper and Skinny would certainly put up some kind of a fight. Laguerre had no fear of the outcome. Neither had Johnny. There could be no mercy for men aiding and abetting such a hold-up as the one near Diamond.

Four days later they found the posse combing the breaks of the Lost Soldiers, but they did not find Spill Harper and Skinny Devinney. These two, said Harmer, were scouting to the eastward. They had left the main party on the second day. Harmer did not ask the reason for Johnny's solicitude respecting the two men from the Bend, but his old eyes were shrewdly speculative.

Nothing was said to Sheriff Stevens or the others of the turpitude of Spill and Skinny. It would be common property sufficiently soon. Besides, the size of a reward is not increased by division.

Sheriff Stevens and all of the posse save Jack Murgatroyd were about ready to go home when Johnny and Laguerre came upon them. Most of them had little businesses of their own that would suffer should they remain away for any length of time. It was the Government's money anyway. They had not discovered a single clue to the identity of the robbers, and they had long since lost the trail. Indeed, they lost it twenty miles south of the railroad. Now, after the rain, further searching was hopeless. It is ridiculously easy, when the first enthusiasm has worn off, to find excuses for not doing a certain thing.

The posse turned back, and Murgatroyd left them to ride his own line. He had voiced his belief that the road agents

had swung off toward the country south of Fort Seymour, where there was a wild jumble of perpendicular scenery. According to Murgatroyd it was a good place to hide in.

Reaching Diamond, Stevens and his men went east on a local freight. Johnny and Laguerre, waiting for Number Three, entered the saloon that catered to travellers and found Harmer leaning against the bar.

"Yore train's gone," said Johnny.

Harmer shook his white head.

"Not mine," he smiled placidly. "I ain't lost any trains. Sent my hoss back on it though. Sort o' thought I'd prospect 'round here a spell. Lively li'l mee-tropolis, this town. Have a drink."

Later, crossing the road, Harmer turned his quizzical eyes on Johnny.

"I'm figurin' on goin' west," he said slowly. "I dunno as I think much of that country south o' Seymour. Livin' on a ranch is so kind of doleful, an' here's a chance for action. Besides, the railroad chunkers in them wrecked cars never had a chance. A gent ought to have an even break for his alley. An' them hold-ups didn't give no even break. Djuh know they found a piece o' that baggage-man's heels, an' not another smidgin 'of him? I didn't like that." His eye-corners puckered and the steady hands stroked the long white beard. "Maybe I'm takin' too much for granted, gents. Maybe—maybe yore interest in this case is ended."

"Not a li'l bit," cried Johnny heartily. "We're shore a heap interested."

"Y' bet yuh, Meestair Harmair," was the half-breed's contribution.

"I'm glad," said Harmer simply. "I shore do enjoy playin' out any hand I pick up."

"An' that's one right good rule," said Johnny Ramsay.

So Mr. Harmer went with them to Damson. There he said he guessed he'd get him a horse and meander around a spell. Johnny suggested that he ride north with them. He was beginning to have doubts concerning Mr. Harmer. There was something secretive about the old fellow. Perhaps— Johnny watched Mr. Harmer very closely.

They pushed their horses to the limit on the northward trail. Twice between Damson and Marysville they passed small parties riding south to join a Federally hired posse hunting the road agents. From one of these they learned that word had been sent to Fort Yardley and Fort Seymour and that four more troops of cavalry would be out within a week.

"Which them hold-ups ain't got a chance," their informant flung back over his shoulder as he rode on after his outfit.

"No," said Johnny gently, "I guess not."

Harmer chuckled, and accurately spat tobacco juice on a small rock.

"Them fellers must be a-laughin' themselves sick about now," he observed. "Fifty thousand dollars an' whatever else was in them ordinary express sacks. My Gawd, it's so easy to fool a sheriff she's a wonder they's an honest man left in the world."

The old cynic chuckled again. The perturbed Johnny watched him like a cat.

Judge Allison was taking the air in the shade of his front porch when the three men rode into Marysville. At sight of them he uttered a joyful cry and ran out into the street.

"Bat Harmer!" he bawled. "Y' old scoundrel!"

To this remarkable greeting Harmer made response by

jumping from his horse with a whoop and beating the judge upon his broadcloth shoulders.

"I was just a-comin' to see yuh, Bill," he said. "I thought I'd better. My friends here are suspicious of me. They think I'm somethin' I ain't. Tell 'em I am."

"Why, Johnny, how could yuh?" reproved the judge. "And Telescope Laguerre too, who should know better."

"I dunno what yo're takin' about," Johnny disclaimed, his face reddening smartly, while Laguerre grinned.

"Don't blame yuh," smiled Harmer. "I did kind o' horn in on yore privacy some. But I wanted to see this deal through, an' I ain't joyful none about playin' a lone hand. I like folks to talk to. That's the kind of a hairpin I am."

Like Harmer? A man couldn't help it. They all went up on the judge's front porch where there was good cheer in a bottle and good feeling in the air.

There was much to tell the judge. He made no bones about issuing warrants for Barry Camp, Spill Harper, and Skinny Devinney.

"I'll issue them at once," said he. "Evidence is more than enough. I should say so—No, I haven't seen any of them. They wouldn't ride through here. Not now. I'm sorry you weren't closer to Bale and Tom. You see, you can't actually identify them as the men who bush-whacked you."

"If I'd been closer to 'em they wouldn't need warrants," Johnny said naively. "But it don't matter. They'll come alive again some'ers."

"Will they stay alive?" queried the judge.

"Well," said Johnny, "yuh know yoreself she's a hard world. Another thing, Judge: I told that Piegan City operator an' the one at Diamond not to talk, but o' course they will, an' what we know everybody else will know soon

an' sudden. But they's no sense in showin' our hand till we gotta. Will yuh keep them warrants a while till—till we bring in the beef?"

"Good idea," nodded Judge Allison. "I will."

The three rode on to Farewell. There were few men in sight. Sheriff Rule, it seemed, had organized the majority of the citizens into a posse and was riding the country between Longhorn Mountain and Cutter. For Chance Blaisdell had brought Sheriff Rule a message from Sheriff Stahl to the effect that the escaped killer, Hen Riley, had doubled south.

"Guess it's the hoss more'n Hen that's botherin' the sheriff," observed Johnny. "Shore thinks a heap o' that cayuse, Bill Stahl does."

They forsook the trail at Farewell and rode northeast, their objective the Harper ranch-house on Dry Creek. They rode the cañons and the draws, and reconnoitred the place by night from the direction of the Medicine Mountains.

"No light nowhere," remarked Harmer.

"Guess we might as well wait for daylight," said Johnny Ramsay.

They waited—lying down-wind among the pines at the back of the ranch. This that the small dog, Biscuit, might not scent their presence. At the first light they approached the house by way of the corral. They did not burst in the back door. They didn't have to. The latch-string was out. Johnny pulled it, and pushed the door open. There were no indignant yaps. No dog was in the house. Nor was any human being. Nor were there any firearms. Which last pleased Johnny.

It would have disappointed him beyond measure to have found in the house the forty sixty-five with which he had

shot against Spill Harper and Skinny Devinney. Leaving the house, Johnny looked under the bench beside the kitchen door. Half hidden by the leg of the bench, a spent shell lay in the pale grass. Under the bulge of the foundation log on the other side of the doorway was another spent shell. Johnny called Harmer's attention to these two cartridge cases. He did not touch them himself.

"Would yuh mind pickin' up them spent shells, an' puttin' 'em in yore pocket?" he added. "I'd do it myself only I'd rather have a third party do it. It—it might look better sometime. Take a good look at 'em while yo're at it."

Harmer picked up the shells and turned them round and round in his palm. He dropped the shells into a pocket of his coat and looked at Johnny.

"I guess maybe yo're figurin' on them empties comin' in handy later," he remarked.

"I guess maybe," said Johnny Ramsay, laying his rifle in the hollow of his arm and fishing out the makings.

As they were constructing their cigarettes there galloped from the woods the dog Biscuit with rabbit-fur on his whiskers and assaulted their ankles. They fended him off with all gentleness, for he was a small animal, but he followed them with savage snarls while they examined the ground roundabout.

"Nobody been here for t'ree week," declared Laguerre, when he had looked at the sign in the corral. "Guess we go."

"Might as well be the Bend," said Johnny. "Tom Keen an' Bale have friends there. It's just possible——"

He did not finish the sentence. Harmer smiled. He thoroughly approved of Johnny Ramsay.

Three tired men on three tired horses, they rode the

length of Paradise Bend Main Street and unsaddled at the hotel corral.

"Le's go see Racey," suggested Johnny when they had flung down their saddles and bridles in a corner of the hotel barroom.

But Racey had seen them ride in, and he was upon them before they reached the street. Racey reported, between swallows, that the red-head, Bale Harper, and Tom Keen had not returned to Paradise Bend.

"Slay in town?" asked Johnny in a whisper.

"Shore is. Swapped drinks with him this mornin'—Huh? Mrs. Wallace? Yuh bet yuh. Run the wheel last night. What yuh wanna know about her for? I thought——"

"Nemmine what yuh thought," cautioned Johnny. "Not so loud."

They were down at the end of the bar, far removed from the other customers, but Racey's voice was prone to rise, and Johnny was a fearful soul.

"Get off my toe!" cried Racey. "Stand on yore own hoof, yuh splay-footed mule! What yuh so partic'lar for anyhow about—yore liquor?" he amended wisely, taking note of the peculiar gleam that had suddenly crept into Johnny eyes.

"Didja say Slay was in the Broken Dollar?" asked Johnny.

"I didn't, but he is. Hey! Where yuh goin'?"

But Johnny was already gone. Racey turned his head. Laguerre, Harmer, and Soapy Ragsdale were listening to a story the bartender was telling. Racey hitched up his pants, shifted his holster forward a trifle, and went out.

Johnny did not hurry down to the Broken Dollar. He

walked quite casually, turned in at the saloon doorway and went to the bar. Slay was standing behind the bar talking to the bartender. He nodded briefly to Johnny and himself set a bottle and a glass before him.

Both Slay's hands rested palms flat on the wood. But the gambler was a wizard with a gun. Johnny canted the bottle with his left hand.

"I didn't know you were left-handed," was Slay's dry comment.

"I am—sometimes," replied Johnny, and drank left-handed.

Slay smiled.

"It's a queer world—sometimes," he said, and swept Johnny's money into the cash drawer.

He again rested his palms flat on the bar. His face was inscrutable. The baffled Johnny departed.

"He's shore a deep one," Johnny told himself. "They's no tellin' whether she told him or not. Wish she would—or somethin'. I'd like to get it over with."

In the street he came upon Racey. That young man was just starting to walk away from one of the windows. Johnny overtook him in one stride.

"Nice day," said Racey guiltily.

"Whadda you wanna mix in for?" asked Johnny directly.

"Well, that Slay might 'a' cold-decked yuh," defended Racey. "Yo're so careless. Yuh know y'are."

"Y' old son of a gun," said Johnny, and affectionately smote his guardian angel between the shoulder-blades with a force that made him stagger.

"She's a hour to supper," Racey observed, returning the blow with interest, and dodging Johnny's counter. "I'm thirsty. I didn't get no drink at the Broken Dollar," he added pointedly.

"Yuh don't need one," declared Johnny. "My Gawd, Racey, yo're a sot now. The last thing Jack Richie says to me was to look out for yuh an' keep yuh away from the red-eye. Honest, Racey, yore face right this minute is one fine advertisement for most any saloon."

"Is that so?" was Racey's crushing repartee. "Is that so? You ain't no pro-progprognosticker yore own self."

"Ha-ha," cried Johnny, affecting to be overcome with mirth, "listen to the man. Say, some time yo're a-goin' to strangle usin' these big words yuh dunno the meanin' of. Lemme tell yuh, yuh uneducated goat, a feller that don't drink is a probationer. Now run along an' don't disturb papa no more, that's a good li'l feller."

Leaving Racey speechless with emotion, Johnny walked away rapidly. He was going to the Burr residence, and hoped to find Dorothy in and her mother out. His hope was realized both ways.

"Hello, stranger," smiled Dorothy, delicately tilting the cover of the saucepan in which peas were bubbling. "How the years have changed you."

"I can't say that for you," said Johnny, with his most engaging grin. "You get better-lookin' every day. It's—it's shore amazin'."

"Amazing?" She lifted her curving eyebrows at this. "Not in the least. I was always a handsome girl. We get more and more beautiful as we grow older, we Burrs. I can't help it. It runs in the family."

"That listens fine. I—I—I——"

"Yes?" Sweetly, with a rising inflection.

"I was just wonderin' if—if—" Here Johnny bogged down completely, and nervously kicked the table.

"For Heaven's sake, stop battering the furniture and

tell me what's on your mind! Here, stand out in the middle of the floor, where your feet can't reach."

He stood out meekly, fumbling his hat, red to the ears, hot as to his head, but with a clammy coldness chilling his backbone. How did a man propose, anyway? What did he say? What was there to say? Johnny perspired freely, gazing haggardly at Dorothy. His knees shook a little. He hadn't realized that it would be anything like this. But Dorothy had to be saved from the horrific fate of marriage with Harry Slay. There were no two ways about that. Johnny had not intended offering himself as a sacrifice quite so soon, but the sight of the man standing in the Broken Dollar, with the Lord only knew what tale of crimes to his discredit, had forced his hand.

"I—I been thinkin' it over," he began desperately, seeing Dorothy as through a glass, darkly, "an' I been thinkin'—I been thinkin'——"

"Seems to me you said that before, didn't you?" Thus helpfully the lady, sitting down on the edge of the table and swinging a pretty ankle.

"I been thinkin'——"

"For Heaven's sake, Johnny, where does it hurt the most? Do you have 'em often? What you need is sulphur and molasses. I know it's a little late in the summer for a spring tonic, but it's the only thing we have handy. Sit down, do, like a nice boy, and take things easy. Try not to think."

"I been——"

"If you say 'I been thinkin' again I'll scream. Begin again—in some other part of the dictionary."

The goaded Johnny spread his legs and flapped a hand at her. As he grew angry, he became correspondingly cooler.

"Look here," he said distinctly, "you ain't gonna marry Harry Slay."

Dorothy stared. Then she smiled very oddly.

"Ain't I?" she asked.

"No, you ain't. You been goin' around with him too much as it is."

"Have I?" With suspicious sweetness.

Johnny, as has been said, knew not the ways of woman. Her mental processes were to him a sealed book. That he was adopting entirely the wrong tone with Dorothy Burr did not occur to him at the moment. Hurriedly, with the utmost confidence, he rushed on to his doom.

"I ain't gonna see yuh make a fool of yourself with a man like that," declared Johnny. "Yo're gonna marry me."

"What is this—a proposal?" demanded Dorothy smilelessly.

"Shore." Now he had said it, Johnny felt a deal better.

"As a proposer," Dorothy said judicially, "you're a first-class cow-puncher. This way out."

She had slid from the table, and one bare arm pointed at the kitchen door. Johnny's jaw dropped. This wasn't the way it worked out in books. She should have thrown her arms round his neck or something. Was he being turned down? He was. Dorothy left no room for doubt.

"I——" he began.

"Shut up!" she cried, and stamped her foot. "You and your 'I's'! You march right out that door and stay out and don't you come back."

"But—but——"

"If you say another word I'll—I'll box your ears. Git!" Johnny got.

When he was gone, Dorothy slammed the door with

vicious force. She looked wildly and unseeingly into the mirror on the wall, then slumped down on a chair beside the table, laid her head on her arms, and began to cry.

She was still weeping into the tablecloth when her mother came in five minutes later. Mrs. Burr dumped her bundles on the table. Dorothy sat up, wiping her eyes forlornly. Mrs. Burr had met Johnny on his way to Main Street. He had not seen her. She had noted the sulky expression on his face and that he was swearing under his breath.

"What's the matter, Dot?" she asked.

"Bub-burnt my arm," was the pat reply.

"Oh." A pause, then another "Oh," and Mrs. Burr proceeded to open her bundles, while Dorothy sniffled and tried to choke down the catch in her breath.

"Didn't I meet Johnny Ramsay comin' away from here?" Mrs. Burr said suddenly.

"Did you?" sniffed Dorothy.

"I never knowed you to cry for a burn before," persisted Mrs. Burr.

"Well, you'd better believe I wasn't crying on account of Johnny Ramsay!" exclaimed Dorothy, and got up and ran stumblingly out of the kitchen into her own room. The closing of her door shook the house. Mrs. Burr heard the creak of bedsprings and the strangled sound of sobbing.

"Poor young ones," sighed Mrs. Burr. "What a lot they got to learn."

Which remark might mean anything.

CHAPTER XXIII

A BURRO BRAYS

JOHNNY went straight from the Burr home to the hotel and drank four whiskies in succession. But he was so angry that the liquor had no more kick than so much water. Furthermore, so engrossing were his thoughts that he forgot to invite his friends to drink with him. The bar might have been unlined for all the attention he paid to the lining.

From the hotel bar-room Johnny went to the house of Jim Mace. Big Jim was just sitting down to supper.

"Set," invited the plump and hospitable Mrs. Mace. "They's twice as much steak there as Jim'll eat."

"I'd shore enjoy to, Mis' Mace," said Johnny, "but I'm in a—I gotta go way. Jim, my hoss needs a rest, an' I gotta go some'ers. Lend me yore red hoss, will yuh?"

Within fifteen minutes Johnny was astride the red horse. He rode his own saddle and Daisy Belle cuddled in her scabbard under his left leg. He was loping along Main Street, heading for the trail to Rocket and the south, when he bethought him of his promise to Mrs. Wallace.

"Well," he grunted, "if I gotta, I gotta."

He turned his horse toward the river.

But Mrs. Wallace was not at home, and Johnny splashed thankfully across the Dogsoldier. He had not been keen for the interview.

That whole night he rode the Rocket trail. Not till the morning light did the angry soreness quit his injured sensibilities. But it left in its place an odd feeling of great personal loss. The feeling grew stronger and stronger. Johnny had not realized that he cared so much for Dorothy. In time the feeling of loss became an ache, a large and healthy ache, that made him acutely wretched. When he reached Rocket and Dave Sinclair's hotel Johnny Ramsay knew what it was to be a blighted being.

"I'll get them road agents," he told himself vindictively, "an' I'll get 'em good. I was just foolin' round before, but now I'm gonna have a real party."

A blighted being is frequently possessed of an almost uncontrollable desire to perform daring deeds and all that sort of thing, thus showing the blighter what she has lost by her inconsiderate action.

The blighted one ate his supper in such sullen silence that Dave Sinclair was annoyed. This was not like Johnny at all. He had tried several subjects, but Johnny had not bitten once. He had monosyllabed extensively and eaten at the same ratio. For his last meal had been a short dinner the previous day, and even unhappiness cannot continuously destroy the appetite of a healthy young man who spends most of his time in the saddle.

Dave Sinclair slid another dish of beans across the table, and hopefully began anew.

"Funny how Hen Riley come to escape?" he remarked.

"Ain't he been dumped yet?" Johnny asked indifferently.

"He ain't an' he won't—not on Bill Stahl's hoss," said Dave emphatically. "Tell yuh somethin', Johnny. Somebody let that jigger out. Yessir, you can't tell me. The door o' that calaboose was unlocked *by a key*."

"That's shore a odd number. A key, huh? I always thought they unlocked doors with a shovel."

"I mean somebody got Bill's keys an' unlocked that door. An' Hen ain't got any friends here either. That's what makes it so funny. Who stole the key?"

"Don't look at me so suspicious, Dave. I didn't steal it. Who did steal it?"

"How'd I know? But it's shore funny. The sheriff's so mad he swears he'll chase Hen from hell to breakfast an' back till he gets his hoss. Hen was shore a fool to take that hoss. He might 'a' knowed Bill wouldn't like it."

Johnny's interest in the jail delivery was but momentary. He relapsed into silence and a cigarette. Later he went to bed and slept till supper time.

In the twilight he mounted his horse and rode on. The red, with ten hours' rest behind him, moved springily. Johnny's plan was to go to Farewell first. From there he meant to work east across the range of the Cross-in-a-box to the Double Diamond A and the Hogpen. From the two latter ranches he would comb the country north to the Medicine Mountains and the Harper Ranch. It was a sufficiently foolhardy enterprise to carry through on one's "lonesome," for the party he was trailing in all probability numbered ten men by now. But Johnny was in no mood for company.

He did not follow the trail. He took the shortest way. The rising sun shone down upon him as he forded the headwaters of Crow Creek seven or eight miles from Cooley's ranch. To Cooley's ranch he rode for breakfast and a sleep on the Cooley porch.

Breakfast was long over when Johnny reached the ranch, but Mrs. Cooley promptly sliced bacon and set the coffee

on to boil. Mr. Cooley joined him in a cup. Visitors were rare at the Cooley ranch.

After breakfast Johnny sat on the porch with Mr. Cooley. Above Johnny's head a double-cinch packsaddle, burro-sawbuck tree, hung against the wall. The breeching, hanging down, made a convenient arm-rest.

"Get out o' here!" It was the voice of Mrs. Cooley speaking from the kitchen door.

The command was supplemented by a splash as of thrown water. Around the corner of the house skipped a frowsy gray burro, not too old, rapidly twiddling indignant ears. The burro's head was dripping wet.

He walked up to the porch, pointed his ears, and stared at Mr. Cooley. Mr. Cooley combed his whiskers, his faded blue eyes half closed. The burro elevated his nose and brayed terrifically. After which he again pointed his ears and looked expectant.

"Want yore chaw, huh?" queried Mr. Cooley, twisting his body so that he could reach down into a deep hip-pocket.

He produced a slab of chewing tobacco, haggled off a jagged corner, and tossed it at the burro. The animal caught it in his mouth with expert ease, shook his head ecstatically, then trotted off to where the grass grew green and tender behind the corral.

"Ain't he a jo-darter?" exclaimed Mr. Cooley admiringly. "Took me three weeks to find out it was tobacker he wanted when he talked like that."

"Three weeks," murmured Johnny, his eyes on the left hip of the retreating burro. "I never knowed you had a Arizona Canary."

"I ain't—Julius ain't mine. He belongs to a prospector that stayed here awhile. The gent rode away final, an' a

week later Julius, pack an' all, come hee-hawin to the kitchen door. So I unpacks him—there's his saddle behind yuh now—an' turns him loose, expectin' the gent will come back for him when he finds he's strayed. But he don't an' there's Julius."

"How long was this prospector here?"

"About a month off an' on. He was scoutin' round them hills north o' here."

"When was he here?"

"Well, he pulled his freight maybe three-four days before I seen you last."

"I thought you said when I asked yuh that time yuh hadn't seen any strangers."

"He wasn't a stranger. I'd knowed him a month. Lander, Tom Lander, that was his name, an' he'd play pedro all night."

"Yeah," said Johnny and went to his saddle where it lay on its side near the edge of the porch and proceeded to untie the strings that bound his slicker. "Did he happen to be here the night of the twenty-third of June?"

Mr. Cooley scratched his head and pondered.

"I think maybe he was," said he. "I'll ask Mary. She'll know."

He bawled his question and Mrs. Cooley came to the door.

"The twenty-third o' June?" she repeated. "Seems to me now that was the day you broke the churn, Cooley, gettin' mad at it for stickin'—shore, yuh needn't mumble an' deny it. You remember all right. Shore, the twenty-third. He wasn't here during the day, Mister Lander wasn't, but he stayed all night."

"Then he was here the mornin' o' the twenty-fourth," said Johnny, getting up from his knees.

"Of course," Mrs. Cooley told him impatiently.

Johnny laid across Mr. Cooley's spread knees the article he had taken from the folds of his slicker. It was a split-ear bridle, hand-carved, silver rein-chains, and silver buckle and conchas. Altogether a superior bridle, and one not easily forgotten. Mr. Cooley blinked.

"That's Tom Lander's bridle," he said slowly, and raised inquiring eyes to Johnny's face.

"I took that off a dead gray hoss about five mile south of here. The brand on that hoss was H L, same as the brand on that burro. Cooley, I don't guess Tom Lander'll ever come back for Julius."

Johnny Ramsay did not ride to Farewell. Instead he returned to Paradise Bend. With him rode Mr. Cooley, a very quiet Mr. Cooley, who chewed a great deal of tobacco and led Julius at the end of a rope. Julius was packed. Under the diamond hitch was stuck a miner's long-handled shovel and pick. On the way they stopped at Rocket.

That their entry into the Bend might be unobserved they rode in at night. Julius was turned into Soapy Ragsdale's corral. Julius' pack and the mining tools were stowed away and out of sight under Soapy's counter.

In the back room of Soapy's store Johnny spoke at some length to Laguerre, Harmer, Soapy, Jim Mace, Racey Dawson and the quiet Mr. Cooley who ceased not to work his jaws squirrel-wise. When Johnny finished talking there was a silence while men looked at each other.

"I'm damned," said Soapy Ragsdale after a space. "I'm *shore* damned."

"Bill Stahl's here now," murmured Jim Mace, drumming with his fingers on the table-top.

"I saw him," Johnny nodded.

"Djuh know," drawled Racey Dawson, "I never did believe Hen Riley doubled back."

"It didn't sound natural," admitted Soapy Ragsdale.

Harmer said nothing. He sat as still as still, his eyes fixed on nothing, his features set like flint.

"How long has Bill Stahl been here?" inquired Johnny.

"Three days," Jim Mace told him. "He's goin' back to-morrow."

"Will he?" said Johnny softly. "I wonder."

"Scotty Mackenzie will want in on this," put in Soapy Ragsdale. "I'm gonna go out to the Flyin' M."

Soapy Ragsdale departed. So did Johnny. But he did not go to the corral. He went down the street to the Broken Dollar and had a lonely one finger at the bar. Across the room, beside the high stool of one of the look-outs, stood Harry Slay.

And that was the man Dorothy Burr intended to marry. For that low-flung bandit, tinhorn, and in all probability murderer as well, she had turned down Johnny Ramsay. Johnny had strong hopes that circumstances arising in the next few days would effectually prevent the marriage. Yet he was no happier, for he himself would not be benefited thereby. Dorothy had refused him, and the world was a dark place to live in, and his life was completely spoiled.

Johnny, sulkily regarding his successful rival, was caught staring and had to nod. To give him an excuse for turning his back, Johnny bought a cigar he didn't want, stuck it unlighted between his teeth and side-wheeled slowly out.

CHAPTER XXIV

A FAIR AND SUMMER MORNING

MANY horses were being saddled at the various corrals in the morning. The men that cinched on the heavy hulls were a serious-faced outfit of citizens. None of them smiled. They rarely spoke one to another.

"I'm takin' one bunch south to Harper's," Johnny said to Scotty Mackenzie, "an' Laguerre's goin' west. Whad-da yuh think o' Crow Creek way for you an' yore boys?"

Scotty was looking down Main Street toward the Rocket trail. His blue eyes turned frosty as he looked. He did not reply for a moment. Then he said:

"I guess none of us will have to go. Here they come now."

Johnny swung round.

"Don't look quite like we expected, do they?" said he.

"De black-tail dun," remarked Laguerre, edging up to Johnny.

Up Main Street five men were riding. The leader was Chance Blaisdell. The others were Jack Murgatroyd and three strangers. One of the strangers was riding a black-tail dun.

Four saddled led horses accompanied the riders. Across each empty saddle a corpse was lashed pack-fashion—a dead and gruesome body with dangling arms and legs that flopped and jerked indecently.

The five rode up and stopped.

"Howdy, gents," said Chance Blaisdell, his alert animal-like eyes sweeping the crowd.

"What yuh got?" asked Soapy Ragsdale.

"We got the fellers that helped hold up the train," declared Chance, smiling, and swinging to the ground. "Caught 'em over on Crow Creek an' rubbed out four of 'em. Where's Bill Stahl?"

"Be here in a minute," said Johnny. "Howdja know they're the hold-ups?"

"Trailed 'em. Skinny squealed before he died."

"Got the cash?"

"Naw, they must 'a' cached it some'ers."

"We'll find that later," contributed the stranger on the dun.

He was a clean-shaven young man with a hard face and a slight stoop.

"But I know Skinny an' Spill Harper was in Piegan City when the train was held up," said Johnny. "They was in the posse with us, Jack, an' you know it."

"Shore I know it," said the dark-faced deputy. "They didn't actually hold up the train. They just fixed it so it would be held up—telegrams an' things," he added vaguely.

"Oh, yeah, I see," Johnny said, looking at the dead bodies.

Chance, relating swiftly the manner in which the four had met their deaths, helped his friends unpack the bodies and prop them sitting against the stockade of the corral. It was noticeable that Chance did all the talking.

"A good job," observed Chance, and rested his knuckles on his hips and spread his legs.

The crowd muttered and swayed closer to the stockade.

Those four dead men were well-known citizens—the Harper boys, Skinny Devinney and Tom Keen.

"I wish we could 'a' got the other six," said Chance, "but she's like I says, gents, their hosses was too handy, an' ours was beat out. We got part of the gang, anyway, an'——"

Johnny had heard enough. He pushed free of the crowd, twitching Racey's sleeve as he passed him.

"Get 'em into the bar an' keep 'em there," said Johnny, when they were behind the kitchen lean-to. "I got a idea. It's a bird. I'm gonna get Julius."

"Wait a shake," begged Racey, greatly mystified by the cryptic sentences.

But Johnny evaded the clutching hands and ran round the corner.

"Talkin's dry work," suggested Racey in Chance's ear. "Let's irrigate—all of us."

Which was a large order, but as Racey intended making Johnny foot the bill, what did he care for money?

Chance and his friends in the van, the crowd jostled into the hotel and lined the bar four deep. Bottle-neck clinked on tumbler-rim and there was merriment and joy.

"Meet my friend, Mister Crail," said Chance Blaisdell, indicating the hard-faced young man who had ridden the black-tail dun.

Racey shook hands with this person and they drank together.

"Dunno what we'd have done without Sam Crail," Chance averred loudly. "It was him done most o' the trailin'."

"It wasn't no trouble," deprecated Mr. Crail, and filled his glass.

Ten minutes later the hotel proprietor, carefully primed by Johnny Ramsay, entered the barroom.

"Hey, Chance!" he called. "How long yuh gonna leave them four remainders in the hot sun? They're too near the kitchen, an' the cook don't like it. You'll have to move 'em."

"Fair enough," said Chance, and he and his four companions went out to the corral. Near the row of bodies, tied to the bar of the gate a melancholy gray burro stood and fanned his ears and tail at the flies. The burro was packed as if in readiness for the trail. Under the diamond hitch was thrust a pick and a long-handled shovel. Across the top of the pack lay a bridle—a beautifully hand-carved split-ear with silver buckle and conchas.

At sight of the burro Chance's eyelids twitched and he stumbled. Then he walked on and laid hold of dead Bale Harper's shoulders.

"Take his feet, Jack," said Chance.

Jack stooped. Mr. Crail and the other two strangers bent over the body of Keen.

"Just stay right there," said Johnny Ramsay. "*An' don't move yore hands.*"

There was something in Johnny's tone that told them he was not joking. The five turned their astonished heads and stared into the muzzles of a large and varied assortment of firearms. At least four deadly weapons were trained on Chance Blaisdell. None of the five men budged.

"What yuh tryin' to do!" cried Chance after an amazed moment.

"I'm doin' it," said Johnny, removing Chance's gun, while Laguerre and a few friends similarly served Chance's comrades.

"I'd shore like to know——" began Mr. Crail.

"So would we lak to know," Laguerre said brutally. "Let dat dead man down easy—so. You come wit' me."

Chance, Crail, Jack Murgatroyd and the other two men did not cease to complain bitterly as they were all herded into the Jacks Up Saloon and crowded into a corner under guard.

"By Gawd!" exclaimed Chance, in a rage. "Whadda you fellers tryin' to do?"

"We just want to talk to yuh a li'l bit," said Johnny mildly, "an' ask yuh a few questions. If yuh answer 'em all free 'an plenteous yuh can go on yore way rejoicin'."

"When I do," averred Chance, "you won't go on yore way rejoicin'."

"Maybe," nodded Johnny. "We oughta appoint a jury an' a judge."

"I'll be judge," said Dan Smith, the marshal.

But Soapy Ragsdale was the people's choice for that office. Dan Smith did not even get on the jury. Much disgusted, he remained to grumble at the proceedings.

"The court bein' made up, we'll begin," Johnny said, and dangled in front of Chance's eyes the bridle with the silver conchas. "Chance," he continued, "djever see this split-ear before?"

Chance hesitated. Then he said:

"Shore. I seen it. It was the bridle on the hoss of the old road agent I had to kill down there at Rocket. You seen me down him when he was tryin' to break away. I s'pose you took the bridle offen his dead hoss over south o' Cooley's. Shore it's his bridle."

As Chance spoke Harmer's finger-nails dug deep into the palms of his hands.

"Djever see that burro before?" pursued Johnny.

"What burro?"

"That gray burro with the pack, tied to the corral bars."

"Never seen it before in my life."

"Shore o' that?"

"Shore."

"Yet that burro is branded L H on the left hip, same as that dead gray hoss south of Cooley's was branded. An' you say you never seen the burro?"

"No, I tell you!"

"Then what made yuh wiggle yore eyes an' stub yore foot when yuh seen him, huh?—Dunno? All right, we'll let it go at that. Here's somethin' else. Djuh remember, Chance, how the old gent yuh downed that time in Rocket, how he come runnin' for Telescope an' me shoutin', 'I can tell—' an' that's as far as he got, 'cause you downed him. I wonder what it was he could tell, Chance?"

"I dunno," said Chance defiantly.

Crail was scratching his head nonchalantly. The other three looked uncomfortable.

"Yuh'll swear yuh found a busted Wells-Fargo package with some money in her an' one of Old Man Fane's buckskin bags on this man you downed in Rocket?"

"Of course I do."

Johnny called Mr. Cooley. That gentleman testified before the pop-eyed crowd that the man killed in Rocket, as described by Johnny Ramsay, was, to the best of his knowledge, none other than Tom Lander, a prospector who had stayed off and on at his ranch, for a month. The bridle Johnny had in his hand was the bridle of Lander's gray horse. He had seen it often, had Mr. Cooley. On the afternoon of the date of the Fane hold-up Lander had been playing pedro with Mr. Cooley at the ranch-house.

The night of the Cutter robbery Tom Lander had slept the night through at Cooley's.

"What's Tom Lander gotta do with me?" snarled Chance.

Johnny took from his pocket a penknife.

"When I was ridin' in from Cooley's me an' Cooley stopped at Rocket," he said. "Naturally I asked Dave Sinclair a few questions. It come out that it was Dave an' the marshal who buried the man you killed, Chance. They searched him first, an' all they found was this penknife. Dave, he kep' it. This is it. Mister Harmer, have you ever seen this knife before?"

Mr. Harmer looked dully at the knife.

"It's my knife," he said quietly. "I lent her to Tom Lander just before he rode away north."

"I seen it too," piped up Mr. Cooley. "I often seen Tom Lander pick his teeth with that knife."

"I guess that's enough," Johnny said. "I knowed they was somethin' off when you downed that feller, Chance. It was so damn unnecessary. He couldn't 'a' got away. But I never really was satisfied till I talked to Cooley. Listen here, Chance. Wasn't you an' three other men sittin' near them mountain ash trees south of Cooley's dividin' the proceeds of the Cutter deal, when along come Tom Lander an' surprised yuh? You wasn't, huh? An' I'm shore you was 'cause we knowed by they bein' no tracks behind the dead gray that he was walkin' when he was downed."

"After takin' Lander prisoner yuh went to Cooley's for a pony for him. Cooley asked yuh to bring him past the ranch so's his wife could see a real live road agent, but yuh took good care not to go near no houses till yuh reached Rocket. There yuh let him try to escape so's

look out the window at the hitchin'-rail in front of the hotel."

Instantly the doorway and windows were crowded with eager heads. Tied by the neck, not to the hitching-rail proper, but to the much stronger anchorage of the middle post, a dun mare alternately swayed back on her rope and snapped her teeth at the empty air. This exercise she varied by lashing out with both hind legs at any dog approaching within five yards of her. Decidedly, that dun mare was not a children's pet.

As the steel is drawn to the magnet, public attention was drawn to the hard-faced gentleman known as Crail. Public opinion voiced itself strongly. The younger set clamoured for the rope.

"Gents, this has gotta be legal!" bawled Soapy Ragsdale, and the solid citizens backed him up, arguing that it was precisely these hasty, unthinking lynchings that gave the West a bad name and retarded immigration. Which was good logic, and made the hotheads pause.

"Y' ain't proved nothin'!" cried Chance, taking advantage of the lull.

"Chance," said Johnny, "you an' yore friends are shorely foxy. Gotta give yuh credit. Which one of yuh was it that thought of lettin' Hen Riley slide out of the Rocket calaboose on Bill Stahl's hoss so that Bill would chase him from hell to breakfast an' get Jake Rule to help him, thereby allowin' the road agents to make a heap o' trail north while the sheriffs was all busy some'ers else? That was one slick trick, that was. An' Murgatroyd gettin' Bill Stahl to let him go to Piegan to look up evidence against the road agents!

"Jack, I never suspected you till that night at Marysville when yuh come bulgin' into the judge's house an'

seen me there. It was one hot night, remember, an' the shades was all down, makin' it hotter. An' you just sat there an' sweated an' never asked why was the shades pulled. Also I never heard yuh talk so much in my life. Which wasn't natural, Jack."

"Say, gents," broke in Crail, "I ask you what has this idjit proved? Hosses that pull back an' shades pulled down! If you can stretch a man on stuff like that, a gent won't dast to look sideways no more without bein' suspected of murder!"

"I'm doin' my best," said Johnny, "an' I ain't all through neither. Listen, she was a forty sixty-five killed Bill Homan, a forty sixty-five was used in the fight at Farewell when Holloway was downed an' Slim Berdan nicked. They was a forty sixty-five at Harper's ranch. Crail, they's a forty sixty-five under yore left fender. Where did yuh buy the cartridges for that rifle? I asked at more than one place, but nobody kept forty sixty-fives in stock—Now, now, don't tell me if yuh don't wanna. It don't make no difference. I was just wonderin', thassall. If Mister Mace would kindly get that rifle."

Mr. Mace kindly would and did. Johnny took the rifle and held it level across his middle.

"Now—" began Johnny.

"Hell's bells," interrupted Crail, "they's lots o' forty sixty-fives. Anybody could easy own one."

"Are yuh shore Skinny Devinney didn't own this rifle?" said Johnny. "Are yuh shore yuh didn't change guns with him after yuh killed him, on account of bustin' yore own or somethin'?"

Johnny looked hopefully at Crail, but Crail was not to be caught by leading questions. He was too clever a bird for that.

"She's my own Winchester," he declared with an oath. "Ask my friends here," he urged.

The four of them eagerly swore to the ownership. The two strangers went further. They said they had seen Crail buy the rifle down in the Panhandle.

"You've had this rifle with yuh right along, then?" said Johnny.

"Shore," Crail told him.

"All right. Gents, you hear what he says. Now you listen hard. Telescope an' I was at the Harper ranch one day. They was a forty sixty-five there. I shot against Skinny an' Spill with it, an' I managed to nick the loadin'-gate with my knife without them seein' me so it scratched the cartridge in two places when yuh put it in. I got the idea from my own loadin'-gate bein' scratched when I first came here an' you'all tried me for the murder of Fane an' Homan. I throwed one o' the empties under the bulge of the foundation log of the ranch-house, another I kicked under a bench by the door. Mister Harmer, will yuh take them two spent shells out of yore pocket an' tell the boys where yuh got 'em."

Mr. Harmer did this. When his testimony was concluded the empties were stood on end on a chair seat, and Johnny took from his pocket seven other spent shells and aligned them with the first two.

"Gents," said he, "Mister Harmer seen me pick up these seven shells near the express-car after the robbery in the cut west o' Diamond. They's a few cartridges in this magazine—by the heft. I'll just work 'em out."

Rapidly he pumped the lever. Four cartridges whirled over his shoulder and clattered on the floor. He picked them up and placed them in a row behind the nine empties.

Crail's eyelids twitched. He was beginning to perceive the true inwardness of Johnny's leading questions.

"I'd like the jury to look at the scratches on them thirteen pieces o' brass," said Johnny Ramsay.

The gentlemen of the jury looked. They and Soapy Ragsdale examined with great care the spent shells and the live cartridges. Judge and jury went back to their places.

"No use a-talkin', boys," said Soapy, addressing the prisoners. "That forty sixty-five Winchester Johnny's holdin' was used in the Diamond hold-up. Do yuh still swear she's Crail's Winchester?"

The five men made no reply.

"They was five men actually in that hold-up," continued Soapy. "We know by what Johnny told us last night that Camp, Devinney, Tom Keen, an' the Harper boys was only accessories. We know Chance an' Jack Murgatroyd was busy some'ers else. That leaves a couple besides you, Crail, an' them two gents at the end. Who an' where is the missin' pair?—Won't tell, huh? All right. Where's Barry Camp?—Dumb again, huh? Where's the money, then?"

"Yo're so smart—you've found out so much," grunted Chance, "s'pose now you just find that money."

"Maybe we will, but you won't be alive when we do. Chance, you an' them other four gents are about the lowest set o' things that crawl. I'd call yuh snakes, only I'd have to apologize every time I meet a reptyle. You an' them four dead men outside was pardners. You downed 'em so's yuh could have their share an' somebody to lay the blame on. You was bright-witted enough to know that folks wasn't none likely to bust their necks askin' where, how, an' whyfor when yuh told yore li'l tale about these

dead men bein' accessories before an' after, so I guess yuh was bright-witted enough to make it a full hand by rubbin' out Camp an' the missin' pair. We hope so.

"We only wish yuh'd brought 'em into camp along with the rest. Was Camp an' any o' you fellers, Crail for instance, in the Farewell racket when Holloway was downed an' Slim Berdan nicked? Was yuh, huh? They was a forty sixty-five in that riot, yuh know—Can't say, huh? All right, let it go at that. I guess some of yuh was there all right, but after all, it don't really signify—now. Look here, how about Bill Stahl? Was he in cahoots with you fellers? We lynched him on suspicion this mornin' early."

"What did yuh hang him for?" cried Jack Murgatroyd. "He didn't know nothin' about nothin'. We used to laugh. Foolin' him was like foolin' a baby. He was just plain simple-minded, that feller. All the same, yuh shouldn't 'a' lynched him."

"We didn't," said the amazing Mr. Ragsdale. "We kind o' thought he was just a mark like you say, so we locked him up in the calaboose till we could find out for shore. We've caught yuh in a heap of lies, but we'll take it yo're tellin' the truth about the sheriff seein' as they ain't a hoofmark to mix Bill into this. Carey, you got the key. Might as well let Bill out. Chance, an' you other boys, here's a idea! We want to know where that money is, an' who the other gents are in this hold-up business. I guess the boys will be willin' to let one of yuh go free if he'll tell us what we want to know. I'll get a pack of cards, an' yuh can cut for high card to win. Hey, barkeep, where's a pack of cards?"

"Nemmine about no cards!" exclaimed Crail. "We'll stand pat, I guess."

Four sullen, defiant faces corroborated—Crail's pronouncement.

"You know best," Soapy said gently, and, with a nice regard for the feelings of the condemned, leaned his head close to Jim Mace's ear while he whispered behind his hand, "Jim, will you slide out an' collect five ropes? The newest an' stiffest, Jim. We'll be along in a minute."

CHAPTER XXV

GREEN AND GOLD

I DIDN'T see Slay at the trial this mornin'," said Racey Dawson to Johnny, as they sat on the reach of a boxless freight-wagon in the cool of the evening.

"I seen him. He wasn't right up under the pulpit, but he was there. At the lynchin' too, he kind of stayed back where it was cool."

"He oughta be down in them cottonwoods with the other five," declared Racey.

"They ain't a thing against him. Nobody snitched on him like I expected. What can yuh prove?"

"Nothin'," admitted Racey. "— the luck! Chance was gonna squeal when he was sittin' there on the hoss under the limb with the rope round his neck. An' you had to let Jack Murgatroyd start the hoss!"

"I've told yuh forty times I was excited. Yuh make me sick! What difference does one man make?"

"It makes a lot of difference," grumbled Racey. "You was the one suspected him in the first place, an' when they's a good chance to get him you gotta spoil it. Y' oughta been more careful. Hell's bells, they's two thousand apiece on them gents! You must think money grows out of the ground like grass."

"There yuh go again, talkin' about money! Ain't yuh never satisfied? Lookit all the money I earned for

you an' Telescope. You don't hear me bawlin' my head off 'cause I gotta divide with you two, do yuh?"

"Huh?—Say, look—— The money you earned for Telescope an' me! Which I shore admire yore nerve! The money you earned! I guess now Telescope didn't do no ridin' round an' trailin' an' all, huh? No, I guess he didn't! An' me, I didn't wrastle a lot o' mules an' hosses that tried to bite me in the pants an' pat my face with their hind feet every chance they got, did I, just so's I could find out things for yuh!

"Oh, no, I didn't. Not a-tall. An' you got the gall to say the money you earned for us. You wait till I tell Telescope. You wait. You two gimme the Dutch rub one time for not talkin' half so loud. You see what happens to you. You see. The money you earned—well, by Gawd, Johnny, the dictionary ain't got the words to describe what I think o' yuh."

"An' that's lucky for you, yuh flathead," Johnny declared tranquilly, "'cause you might say somethin' I didn't like, an' then what them jacks done to you won't be a marker on what I'd do to yuh."

"Oh, is that so?" cried the provoked Racey. "Now—ow—wow! That's a new shirt!"

"I'm a-goin' away," Johnny told him, hurriedly withdrawing into the darkness. "'Cause if I stayed first thing yuh know you an' me would be quarrelin'—What yuh squallin' about? I didn't tear yore shirt—much."

Johnny dodged a hurled rock and fled.

He had fooled with Racey, but he did not feel in a fooling mood. Life since his last conversation with Dorothy was a serious affair. Soberly he went up to his room in the hotel, lit the lamp, turned it low and sat down on the cot. For the twentieth time he took from his pocket the small,

square package with the obliterated address, that he had picked up at the scene of the Diamond hold-up. For the fifteenth time he opened the package and dribbled into his open palm some of the coarse dust therein.

In order to see better he turned up the lamp, and his elbow, brushing the top of the table, knocked to the floor the heavy outer wrapping of the package. Stooping, and retrieving the brown manila paper, he held it for a chance instant between him and the light.

His eyes widened. The chance instant became a long two minutes during which he continued to hold the paper between him and the lamp.

"Of course I knowed it," he told himself as he put the paper down, "but I wasn't shore, an' anyway what good does it do? If I only knowed where you come from," he added wistfully, eyeing the dust in the hollow of his palm.

Idly and absent-mindedly he began to pour from one hand to the other that tiny heap of coarse dust. In the bright flame of the lamp the gold shone dully. Here and there in it minute particles were tinged a lambent green. Johnny had not previously remarked this greenish colour.

Quickly he poured back the dust into the package, wrapped it, tied it, and put it in his pocket.

"She's a chance," he said, "but maybe he can tell. Funny I never thought o' that before."

He blew out the lamp, and clattered down the stairs to the bar-room and the street.

An hour later Johnny issued from the doorway of a house not far from Soapy Ragsdale's store. In front of the store he paused, built himself a cigarette, and looked down the street where glowed the lighted windows of the Broken Dollar.

"No sense in waitin'," he said to himself, and strode briskly down the street.

Mrs. Wallace was not in her accustomed place behind the roulette table when Johnny looked through the nearest of the open windows. One of the faro dealers was spinning the wheel, and Slay, cold, immobile, a dead cigar up thrust beneath his pointed nose, was watching the plays.

Johnny went down to the end of Main Street where his view of the Slay residence on the river bank was not blocked by the houses of the town. There was a light behind the drawn shades of the sitting-room. Johnny walked across the street and turned into the path that led to the house.

He stepped up on the porch and knocked on the door. Almost instantly it opened, and Mrs. Wallace stood before him. She was in evening dress. Her smooth shoulders gleamed satiny in the light of the lamp on the table behind her. She smiled her quick bright smile when she saw the visitor was Johnny.

"Come in," she said, and, when he had entered, closed the door and indicated an armchair near the window.

"Take that chair," said she. "It's the same comfortable one you sat in before."

Johnny sat, and found himself back to the door and facing the light. The lady sat down sidewise on the couch. Table and lamp were at her left.

"You've been very remiss," chided Mrs. Wallace. "You promised to come to see me the first time you were in town, and this is the second time you've been in."

"I did come here the first time I was in town, but you was out some'ers. I couldn't wait. I had business. But I'm here now, an' you can tell me what kind of trouble

yo're in an' what yuh want me to do—that is, if yuh still want me to help yuh?"

"Why, of course I do—Bless that lamp! It shines right in my eyes."

She rose swiftly, moved the lamp from the centre of the table to the end opposite Johnny, and went to one of the windows and raised the lowered shade halfway to the top.

"Pretty hot," said she. "We'll raise the shade a trifle even if it does let in the insects. I wish I dared to raise them all."

She sat down again with a pleasant rustle of silk and clasped her hands round one of her knees. Her profile was as much in the light as ever.

"Before yuh tell me anythin'," said Johnny, "I wanna tell you somethin'. They's five men hangin' down in them cottonwoods."

He paused, and her face paled the least bit.

"Yes," she murmured. "I—I saw them."

"What yuh didn't see was how Chance Blaisdell was gonna snitch an' Jack Murgatroyd kicked the hoss Chance was on, an' the hoss started an' swung Chance off. I had hold of Jack at the time, an' I could 'a' stopped him, but I let him go just long enough for him to kick the hoss."

"Why did you?"

"Why do yuh s'pose? Who was Chance gonna snitch on?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Yes yuh do too. He was gonna squeal on yore brother, an' you know it."

"My brother! Why——"

"Whatsa use playin' innocent? I've been shore from the day Harry Slay brought me in to the Bend an' tried

to have me hung that he was the head o' this road agent outfit. Findin' Bill Homan's watch near the wagon slue quicksand made it a cinch the gang's headquarters was here in the Bend. Yeah, Bill Homan's watch, I said. Harry sort o' overthrewed for once—or was it you? Makes yuh wink, don't it? Now listen here, I lost one good opportunity to dump Harry by lettin' Jack start Chance's hoss 'cause I wanted you to get clean away before the dam broke. If it hadn't been for you here Blaisdell could 'a' talked his head off an' welcome. I gave you a chance at Piegan City. You could 'a' drifted yoreself then, an' you could 'a' taken yore brother with yuh. But yuh couldn't see it that way. Yuh had to come back—with him.

"I'm givin' yuh one more chance. Go now. If yuh don't yo're a heap liable to be squeezed between the cow an' the corral when Harry gets dumped. He's gonna get dumped. Don't think he ain't. I'll see to that. Remember what I told yuh about them Injun rustlers an' the one hoss too many? This paymaster hold-up is that one hoss. Now you do what I tell yuh—hit the trail an' hit it quick. I expect yuh'll tell Harry what I said.

"Maybe it'll save a lot of trouble all round if yuh do. Maybe he'll want the other way. Shootin' it out always does make a deal simpler. Suit yoreself. Anyway you've got the warnin'. Honest, I don't wanna see anythin' happen to you. Can't yuh see I don't when tellin' you means yore brother will have his chance, too?"

"You've talked a lot, but you've said hardly anything. You suspect—what does suspicion amount to? You can prove absolutely nothing."

The words were sufficiently brave and her eyes were steady as she vainly endeavoured to stare him down. But

her face was absolutely colourless. The little pulse in her throat was throbbing frantically.

"I was hopin' yuh'd take my word for it an' git," he told her. "Yuh want proof. I had to figure before on some jigger snitchin' for that proof, but now I got it my own self. Here she is."

From the pocket of his chaps he produced a small square package wrapped in thick brown manila paper. The eyes of Mrs. Wallace dilated. She uttered a faint gasp. Johnny held up the package.

"I picked this up under the express-car in the cut near Diamond," said he. "The address was all smooched up with dirt so's yuh couldn't read it. Last night I just happened to hold the outside wrapper against the lamp-light. Yuh could read the address quite plain then. I guess when yuh addressed them eight li'l packages to yoreself care o' the Sailors' National in San Francisco, yuh never expected they'd go out on the same train that carried the paymaster, now did yuh?"

"My brother will certainly kill you, Mister Ramsay. Never doubt it. That package you hold in your hand is mine and it is one of the eight. How does it or its contents prove anything? I suppose I'm stupid, but——"

"No, you ain't stupid. That's the last thing you ever will be. Yo're clever as forty foxes, but why yuh ain't more mad is what I can't see. You'd oughta be hollerin' an' denyin' everythin'."

"A scene is low—and ineffective. As I said, my brother will kill you. I'd like to, myself. About that proof——"

"Shore. In this package, as yuh know better than I do, they's gold dust. They's tiny speckles of green in this dust. I took this dust about two hours ago to Aronson. You know Aronson. He's one good assayer, an' what he

'dunno about mines—well. Aronson says that this dust comes from Old Man Fane's mine. Which that mine is the only one within five hundred miles that has traces of copper in the dust. Do yuh still say this package is yores?"

Mrs. Wallace ran the tip of a pink tongue along the edges of her lips.

"What are you going to do?" she asked with admirable calm.

"Give you time to slope. Take yore brother with yuh if yuh like. Whatever yuh decide will suit me. They's a stage south to-morrow. I keep my mouth shut about this package for three days. After that——"

He left the sentence unfinished and returned the little square package to his pocket.

"Now yuh know," he told her.

"Now I know," she said. "I know a great deal more than I did. I wonder if you know something, too. I wonder if you know why I asked you to come to see me the first time you came to town."

"I was waitin' for you to tell me."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CLAWS OF THE LEOPARD

THERE was a row of sofa-cushions ranged along the back of the couch. She slid her hand under the nearest, withdrew it quickly—and in somewhat less than the blink of an eye, a sawed-off, double-barreled eight-gauge Greener lay across her knees, the twin muzzles trained on Johnny's abdomen. Furthermore, both hammers were cocked and two white fingers hung on the triggers.

"Now I know why yuh didn't get mad," observed Johnny, looking death in the eye, so to speak. "With four aces like that in yore hand yuh could afford not to. Tell yuh what, if that shotgun's loaded, an' you keep on a-fiddlin' with them triggers they's gonna be one awful mess in this armchair."

He grinned at her, but he was careful not to move his hands from where they rested on the arms of the chair.

"You should have had better sense than to come spying on us," said she.

"Yore sawed-off shore says so."

"Why couldn't you mind your own business? Why did you have to come up here?"

"Somebody had to."

"You didn't have to be the somebody."

"Maybe not, but what yuh worryin' about? I won't be somebody after you've pulled them triggers."

She contemplated him, her expression a mixture of speculation and regret.

"I wish there were some means of arranging this thing," she said. "I rather like you. You've amused me—in a way."

"In a way."

Johnny laughed quite heartily. And he had thought she was in love with him. Had he been a Frenchman he would have shrugged his shoulders.

"But, of course," she went on, "we have to make sure."

"They's only one way to make shore."

"I know. I'm sorry. It was very decent of you to warn me and give me my chance. I do appreciate it. Unfortunately I cannot show my appreciation."

By her manner she might have been declining a cup of tea.

"You shore can make the old dictionary sit up, play dead an' roll over," he remarked admiringly. "But ain't that Wells-Fargo cannon yo're a-dandlin' across yore knees kind o' heavy? Why don't yuh use a derringer?"

What a foolish question to ask with death a breath away. He wondered what death would be like. Once, long ago, he had seen an Indian killed by a shotgun fired at close range. The charge had blown out half the redskin's ribs. Somehow, it seemed to Johnny that he was not actually a participant in the grim situation staged by Mrs. Wallace.

This person in the armchair simply could not be Johnny Ramsay. The scene was too unreal. It was like a dream, a peculiarly disagreeable nightmare. He would wake up in a moment and find himself crosswise on his bed, fighting the pillow, with Laguerre desiring profanely to know why he couldn't let other folks sleep.

He repeated his question regarding the derringer.

"Better not talk," she advised.

At which Johnny was provoked to irritation.

"You've shore got a nerve!" he cried. "Can't yuh let a man talk? Why don't yuh pull the trigger? What yuh waitin' for?"

"I'm waiting for Harry. When he comes home he'll—do what's necessary. I'm just keeping you here till he comes. He should be here almost any time."

"Oh, he should, huh? I was wonderin' why yuh moved the lamp an' raised the shade. If Harry walks down to the end of Main Street he can see the signal plain as yuh please. That's shore one nice trick to work on a orphan child like me."

She made no reply.

"You'll both be lynched," declared Johnny.

"Oh, no, that's all fixed. Harry'll simply say he came home and found me struggling in your arms. and I'll swear to it."

"'Strugglin' in yore arms' sounds like a book. I read that some'ers. Maybe they won't believe yuh."

"Yes, they will. I'll tear my dress and scratch my arms so everything will look natural. We'll be believed. Don't worry."

"I ain't—much. It don't seem necessary somehow. Yuh think of everythin', don't yuh? Wiser'n forty owls, yuh bet yuh. An' I let you come honeyfugglin' round me an' pile on the sawder a foot thick! But yuh didn't find out much till I chose to let yuh, did yuh?"

"I didn't find out a thing till I caught you in Damson watching Harper and—and the others, when you should have been hunting the Flying M strays. Then I knew what you had come to the Bend for. But Harry suspected

you from the very first. He'd have finished you before this, but I couldn't let him till I was sure."

No saleswoman selling notions could have been more painfully matter-of-fact than Mrs. Wallace as she talked so fluently of eliminating a human being. The pungent humour of it suddenly struck Johnny full force. He laughed till the tears came.

"Scotty was right," he said, when he could speak. "He told me yuh was prettier than a li'l red wagon, but always yuh reminded him of a leopard. I never understood what he meant. It's shore a stand-off who gets the credit though—you or the leopard."

She began to tap the floor with an impatient toe.

"What's the hurry?" he jibed. "Don't grudge me the last few minutes, do yuh?—Well, I seen yore click-clackin' away an' I though yuh was gettin' nervous. Say, look here, Mrs. Wallace, djuh remember one evenin' goin' out back o' the Broken Dollar, climbin' into a empty freight-wagon, an' cryin'. 'My Gawd, what a life!' was what yuh said a couple o' times. I was right close an' heard yuh. Now yuh wouldn't 'a' bawled an' said that if yuh enjoyed stayin' with Harry Slay. Whatsa use of stickin' by him. He don't treat yuh right. Some day he'll hit yuh again like he did out near the sidetracks in Piegan City.

"Yo're a-figurin' on quittin' some day. I heard yuh say yuh would. Besides, if you wasn't figurin' thataway why did yuh take the trouble of packin' yore share of the stuff that was stole clear to Piegan City? You done it so's yore brother wouldn't be likely to find out where yuh sent it. He'd 'a' stopped yuh if he could. You know it. Yo're aimin' to have a nice li'l stake all ready waitin' in the Sailors' National when you get ready to pull yore

freight. An' you don't wanna divide it with any one either. Shore. Ain't I right?"

"If it does you any good—you are."

"Well, then, why wait? You slide out now, an I'll help yuh get away. Remember them Injun rustlers an' the last hoss. The cards'll turn that way for you. They always do if yuh play long enough. They gotta. Now——"

"Please stop talking. It's useless. I advise you to think of something else."

Her voice was cold. Her face was as hard and expressionless as that of a graven image. Johnny watched her intently, his muscles tense to take advantage of the slightest waver in her eyes, of the least deflection of the Greener's barrels. But there was no waver and no deflection.

Johnny's ears were alert to catch the sound of footsteps on the path or on the porch, and the squeak of an opening door. Perhaps Slay would elect to shoot him through the window. In that case. . . .

Johnny's eyebrows drew together in a scowl. His sardonic gray eyes turned sullen. What a failure he had made of the affair. True, he had ferreted out oddments of evidence in one place and another, but they did not piece together into a harmonious whole. There were bits that he had hoped to work out, and now he would never work them out. His own impending demise troubled him less than the thought that the gambler, his saddlebags and canteens stuffed with other men's money, would go on his way rejoicing—and doubtless marry Dorothy Burr. The hair on the back of his neck began to rise.

"Don't try to hitch your chair round!" The words of caution came sharp and clear.

The fingers poised on the triggers stiffened.

"Me!" exclaimed Johnny. "Me hitch my chair round! Yo're crazy. My leg's asleep, that's all."

"Don't try to wake it up."

Ensued a period of silence while a man might draw ten slow full-lunged breaths. Then, without a preliminary sound from the porch, the door gave a gentle creak. The face of Mrs. Wallace altered subtly. For the merest fraction of a second her eyes flickered toward the doorway. Johnny needed no further encouragement. He hurled himself out of the chair, dodged sidewise, and struck up the barrels of the shotgun.

BANG-G-G! The Greener roared like a cannon in that confined space. With the flash of the gun Johnny was crouching down and forward, his gun was out, and he was shooting at two hazy figures blocking the doorway—two figures whose spitting six-shooters blazed redly through the swirling smoke. There had been a third man, but the shotgun had called him, and now he sprawled face downward on the floor.

When Johnny's gun was empty so was the doorway. Of the two men formerly occupying the space one lay upon the floor, kicking and jerking, a bloody froth bubbling at his lips. The other, gunless, hatless, the breast of his shirt heavy with a crimson sogginess, leaned against the wall and clutched his middle with both hands. Even as Johnny looked the long legs gave at the knees, the body crumpled to the floor, jackknifed as in a cramp, then straightened and lay still. So passed out Barry Camp, well and unfavourably known to Johnny and his friends as the Red-head.

In the pressing excitement of the moment Johnny had forgotten Mrs. Wallace. He whirled to face her and saw

her, a tumbled heap of silken draperies and soft white flesh, huddled across the couch. His first thought was that she had stopped a bullet. Searching eyes and fingers discovered no mark of one. She had simply fainted.

Johnny reloaded his six-shooter, lowered the hammer on an empty chamber, slid the weapon into its holster and crossed to the other side of the room. The citizen who had taken his death-wound so hardly, the first to fall of the two with whom Johnny had joined issue, lay twisted and motionless, his head on the doorsill. Johnny looked at the face with its slack-jawed, bloody mouth and glazing eyes. He did not know the man.

His gaze passed over the body of Barry Camp and rested on that of the man who had received the Greener's double charge. Johnny heaved the corpse over on its back and stared into the stiff countenance of Harry Slay. Apparently not a buckshot had missed the gambler. The right side of the throat was torn, shredded and pulped. The right arm, ripped off at the shoulder, lay three yards away, the fingers clenched on the butt of a discharged derringer. There was a welter of blood about. It was seeping into the cracks between the floor-boards.

Johnny went out on the porch, propped himself on a chairback and was frankly sick at his stomach. The paroxysm past, he went in to Mrs. Wallace. She had not yet come to. Johnny sat down to wait.

While he waited he became aware of a faint sound, a sound that brought back with a rush the days of his boyhood—when he had lived in a house with a cellar. But this house had no cellar. There was not a cellar in Sunset County, or Fort Creek either, for that matter. Yet the sound continued, the sound of water leaking down into a cellar. Then, quite suddenly, Johnny understood. It

was not water that was dripping so regularly, nor was it a regular cellar.

Mrs. Wallace stirred, moaned, and put a groping hand to her head. Johnny went to her quickly. The dark eyes opened slowly, painfully, and the woman looked up stupidly into Johnny's face. He stepped back. She raised herself on an elbow. She caught sight of what lay beyond the table.

"Dead?" she whispered in a dry voice. "Dead?"

Johnny nodded. He wondered that she should suddenly look so old. Her eyes wide, staring at the silent dead, she dragged herself to a sitting position. She swayed uncertainly to her feet and stumbled round the table. Clinging for support to the edge of the door, she looked down at the body of the red-head lying at her feet. Then slowly she sank to her knees and with an utterly inadequate handkerchief strove to wipe the dust and dirt from the still face.

Johnny stooped beside her and very gently took hold of her arm.

"This—this ain't yore brother," he told her. "He's yonder. You come along with me now till we can fix things up so they're fit to look at. Come along, Mis' Wallace. This ain't yore brother," he repeated, as she made no movement to obey.

She raised a gray face.

"I know he isn't my brother," she said. "He's my husband—my Dave. Oh, Dave! Dave!"

As if the name had been the lever to the floodgate of pent emotion she burst into a storm of wild sobbing.

Her husband! Johnny retreated to the far side of the room and rubbed an amazed forehead. The evening had been sufficiently crammed with surprises, but this

rather capped the climax. But Johnny's was a snap and faulty judgment. The climax was not yet.

In the red-head's belt a long bowie lay snug in its sheath. Mrs. Wallace raised a tear-stained face. A lock of hair twisted down across her forehead. She put up a hand and pushed the lock back into place. Her eyes were fixed and staring. Her right hand, groping along the red-head's belt, rested an instant on the hilt of the bowie. Then she jerked out the long knife and jammed the point against her body under the left breast.

Johnny could move swiftly on occasion. And now he moved very swiftly. But he was not swift enough. Her two hands steadying hilt and blade, Mrs. Wallace fell forward on the steel.

When Johnny picked her up and laid her on the sofa she was dead.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE END THEREOF

TALK about luck!" cried Soapy Ragsdale for the tenth time. "If them fellers hadn't bled like stuck pigs an' run down into that cache of a cellar nobody would ever thought of lookin' under the floor. You'd oughta been there, Jim. All the paymaster's money, nearly all of Old Man Fane's dust an' the money stole from Cutter, besides a raft of gold slugs an' dust rustled Gawd knows where. My eyes stuck out a foot when me an' Johnny pried up them boards an' seen it all. Bet yuh they's two hundred thousand there when Aronson gets through weighin' her all."

"Shouldn't be surprised," Mace nodded. "That outfit shore didn't do a thing while they lasted."

"The Greener shore didn't do a thing to Slay," contributed Mr. Cooley, stroking his whiskers.

"When yuh come to think of it, Johnny's atomizer sort o' put a crimp in them other two boys," said Scotty Mackenzie. "Gents, they was three holes in the red-head—two in his stummick, an' one just over his heart, an' the other feller had one hole in his lung an' another right through his face the longest way. Pretty shootin' lemme tell yuh, pretty shootin'."

"Wonder who that other feller was," puzzled Racey Dawson.

"He's one o' them two besides the red-head we didn't

account for at the trial," said Mr. Ragsdale. "Now they's only one missin'. Only one li'l outlaw runnin' round loose an' promiscuous."

"We'd oughta got him too," mourned Mr. Cooley.

"Yuh can't expect everythin'—not in this world," emphasized Mr. Mace. "What gets me is why Mis' Wallace killed herself. She didn't have no call to do it."

"Guess findin' out what her brother was sort of throwed her. He was shore slick to keep it from her—if he did keep it from her." Scotty Mackenzie cocked a shrewd eye at his friends.

"Shore he did," defended Jim Mace warmly. "She didn't have no hand in the business. Johnny said so, an' we all know——"

"Aw, have it yore own way," interrupted Scotty. "I'll own up I never thought Slay was in the gang, but leopards is a harp with another tune entirely. Yessir, now I know the inside of the deal the more I'm shore I don't like leopards none."

"What's leopards gotta do with it?" asked Carey.

"A lot," grinned Scotty, "only yuh wouldn't understand if I told yuh. Where's Johnny?"

"Down by the Dogsoldier—skippin' stones when he ain't bawlin' out his friends," grumbled Racey Dawson, who, by his manner, knew painfully whereof he spoke.

"Whatsa matter with him?" asked Scotty. "Ain't he pleased?"

"Pleased, nothin'! An' I dunno what's the matter with him. I located him down there behind the tamaracks by the big rock, an' he's squattin' on his heels skippin' li'l flat stones across the river. 'A good night's work, Johnny,' says I, an' he grunts at me like a pig. So I seen

he needs cheerin' up, an' I cracked him on the back an' told him how Telescope an' me's been figurin' up an' his share o' the reward is near five thousand five hundred dollars. 'It ain't worth it,' says he, kind of dreary like. 'Djuh want it all?' I screeched at him, an' he cusses an' I cusses, an' after I'd clumb out o' the water I come away an' left him. Which Johnny's too playful to-day to suit yores truly."

"I was wonderin' how yuh got wet," chuckled Ragsdale, winking at the others.

"'S funny how Johnny come to use the Greener," Racey, with a very red face, said abruptly. "Yuh wouldn't think he'd have time to handle both a shotgun an' a six-shooter against them three fellers."

"He says himself everythin' happened so quick an' sudden he don't really know how he done it," explained Mr. Cooley. "It's likely to be that way sometimes. A gent'll do things an' he dunno how he does 'em. Curious, that is, ain't it?"

On the top of a wooded knoll north of Paradise Bend a man sat nursing his knees and a worry.

"Dave an' Lefty shore oughta be back before this," he told himself, and got up and began to walk back and forth. "My Gawd yes. Twelve hours they been gone on a two-hour job."

He began to swear and scuff his boot-toes through the pine-needles. He was a long-jawed citizen, this man, with light blue eyes and hair the colour of old rope. His cheeks and chin were covered with a nine-days' growth of stubble. He was not at all a prepossessing person, and his age was a scant thirty years.

"Fool trick lettin' Slay keep the money an' dust," he

grunted. "Bet I'll never see my share of it. Bet somethin' happened."

Tied to the trunks of near-by pines were three horses. One of these horses was the red-head's blue.

"——!" suddenly exclaimed the long-jawed man. "I ain't a-goin' to take root here, that's a cinch."

He zigzagged down the slope of the knoll and began to walk through the woods in the direction of Paradise Bend. From a side-pocket of his coat he took a pair of field-glasses and began to wipe them with a none-too-clean handkerchief.

Within the hour he returned more speedily than he went.

"Four new-laid graves," he kept repeating between his teeth. "Four new-laid graves. An' they was a crowd on the front porch an' a feller with scales, an' he was a-weighin' dust an' slugs to beat—— Two hundred an' fifty thousand! Might 'a' knowed they'd look under the floor."

Steadily swearing, he went directly to the three horses and stripped the saddles and bridles from two of them.

"There now," said he, "I guess you won't be needed no more. Let her flicker."

He slapped his quirt across the rump of one. They both fled with whisking tails. The man then loosed and mounted the red-head's blue.

"'S funny," said he, as he rode away into the woods, "I always wanted to swap cayuse an' boot for you, hoss, an' Dave Yule just never would trade, said he had a hard enough job swappin' that black-tail dun with Sam for yuh. I told Crail he was a idjit to swap. Yo're twice the hoss that yaller killdevil ever will be. 'S funny, all right. She'll be funnier when you an' me come back, hoss. Yessir, you an' me are a-goin' to make Paradise

Bend sit up on her hind legs an' play tunes before we're through. Nobody can get my share away from me an' not pay for it, nawsir, they can't. What's that piece about the mills o' Gawd grind slowly but they git there in the end? That's me. I'm one o' them mills. I git there in the end."

But how he got there has nothing to do with the story.

Johnny, alternating the skipping of stones with the smoking of many cigarettes, ceased not to wallow in the swamp of despair. He wanted Dorothy Burr, and wanted her so much that it hurt. He knew that he might as well wish for the moon. Dorothy's refusal of him had been too definite. There was no getting around that.

And Racey Dawson, the deluded imbecile, trying to hearten him up with the news that almost fifty-five hundred was due him. What did he care for fifty-five hundred? Damn the money! Damn Racey! Damn everybody! He just guessed he'd go back to the Cross-in-a-box, he would. This travelling round wasn't what it was cracked up to be, not by a jugful.

Johnny stuck disgusted hands into his pockets and walked morosely back to the hotel. He paid his bill and went into the barroom for his saddle and bridle. Neither was there.

"Must 'a' left 'em out to the corral," said Johnny, and went there.

But the saddle and the bridle were not at the corral, nor was Johnny's horse within the stockade. Greatly perturbed, Johnny returned to the barroom and spoke to the bartender.

"Why shore," said the bartender, "Buster Ragsdale took yore saddle an' bridle about an hour ago. Said they

was wanted, so I thought it was all right an' let him take 'em—Huh? No, he didn't say nothin' about yore hoss."

Johnny hurried to the Chicago Store. But Buster was not there, nor had his mother seen him since breakfast. Johnny went out into the street and made inquiries. The third man he met told him that he had seen Buster Ragsdale putting Johnny's horse into the Burr corral.

Johnny worriedly pushed back his hat and whistled. His horse in the Burr corral, and the previous night he had taken on his own shoulders the burden of Slay's death! His quixotic chivalry toward a dead woman was apt to cost him dearly. He could not get his horse out and away unobserved. And what would Dorothy say? More than he would care to hear, probably. As has been said, Johnny was not conversant with the mental processes of a woman. He was still the small boy fearful of the rod and the lashing tongue.

Hugely uncomfortable, heartily cursing the day he left home, Johnny made his perspiring way to the Burr corral.

"The fool kid!" muttered the exasperated Johnny. "That's shore one fine trick to play on me!"

Stealthily he approached the corral from the rear and looked through the stockade. There was his horse, right enough, touching noses with one of the Burr mares. The horse was not saddled. The bars of the gate faced the kitchen door.

"Oh well," said Johnny, or words to that effect, and he hitched up his chaps and went to face the worst.

The kitchen door was shut. Johnny, his soul a-squirm with apprehension, knocked with lax knuckles on the door. For a breathless moment there was no sound within. Perhaps they had all gone out. A long breath of relief parted Johnny's lips. Vain hope. The door

opened, and Mrs. Burr appeared, her angular face beaming. Johnny Ramsay did not see the smile. He saw the herald of the executioner and quite plainly too.

"Go right in," invited Mrs. Burr, stepping over the door-sill. "I'm a-goin' down street a while. You—you go in."

She gave his arm a pat and a shove. Johnny found himself inside the kitchen. The door closed at his back. There was nobody else in the kitchen. In a corner lay his saddle, his bridle snaked across the seat. Johnny took one quick step forward—and stopped.

Framed in the doorway giving into the other part of the house stood Dorothy Burr. Her hands were clasped behind her back. She looked at him coolly. Johnny's knees shook a little. He was scared to death.

"I—I cuc-come for my saddle," stuttered Johnny Ramsay.

"Did you?" Dorothy said composedly.

She came into the room and stood in front of him and looked him steadily in the eye. Johnny gulped. He was suffering the tortures of a lost soul. He strove to return stare for stare. He couldn't. With a mental jerk he became conscious that Dorothy was speaking.

"How do you suppose your horse and saddle got here?" she asked, patiently repeating her question a second time.

"I—I dunno—Buster brought 'em."

"I told him to."

"You told him to!"

She nodded, and for the first time since the interview began her eyes wavered. But they came bravely back to meet his.

"I—I wanted to see you before you went away, and—and I wanted to make sure I would see you."

It was coming now. In about ten seconds she would begin telling him what she thought of him.

"Well, yo're seein' me."

Behind her back her hands twisted together. Her round chin quivered.

"You said something to me once. I—I wanted to hear you say it again."

But he didn't say it again. Instead he took her in his arms and kissed her hard several times.

"Let me—breathe just once—dear," she said in a muffled voice.

"Plenty o' time for that later," he told her, and kissed her again.

At this juncture Mrs. Burr peered in at a convenient window.

"My fathers!" she whispered ecstatically and wiped her misting eyes. "Ain't that just too nice for anythin'! I remember when Benjamin used to hug me thataway. Johnny's a real good boy," she added, and sat down on the chopping-block to wait.

Inside the house Johnny and Dorothy were occupying one chair. It was not a large chair, but they managed.

"I thought yuh liked——" began Johnny, and left the sentence unfinished.

The arm round his neck tightened.

"I did *like* him—in a way," said Dorothy soberly. "He was good company and all that, and he was nice to me, and nice men are scarce in the Bend."

"Yuh rode with him a lot." But he pressed his lips to her hair at the end of the sentence.

"Before you came I did it to amuse myself. After you came I did it to stir you up, and you wouldn't stir for the longest time. Why didn't you?"

"I did. Yuh know I did, an' yuh turned me down—cold."

She stirred in his arms, her cheek snuggled against his shoulder.

"Oh, that," said she, tranquilly, "was your fault."

"My fault!" Surprisedly.

"Certainly, silly. I had it all planned out just how you were going to propose and everything. It was to be in the moonlight when I had on my best silk and a big bow in my hair and you were to get down on your knees when you asked me to marry you. Instead of that you came busting into the kitchen when I was getting supper and laid down the law in your loudest bellow. You didn't even ask me whether I wanted to marry you or not, you just took everything for granted and said I had to. You spoiled all my nice plan and you made me good and mad, and after you'd gone I cried, and I didn't eat any supper, and I cried some more."

"An' yuh wanted to marry me all the time?" said Johnny in amazement. "Even when yuh was tellin' me to drift?"

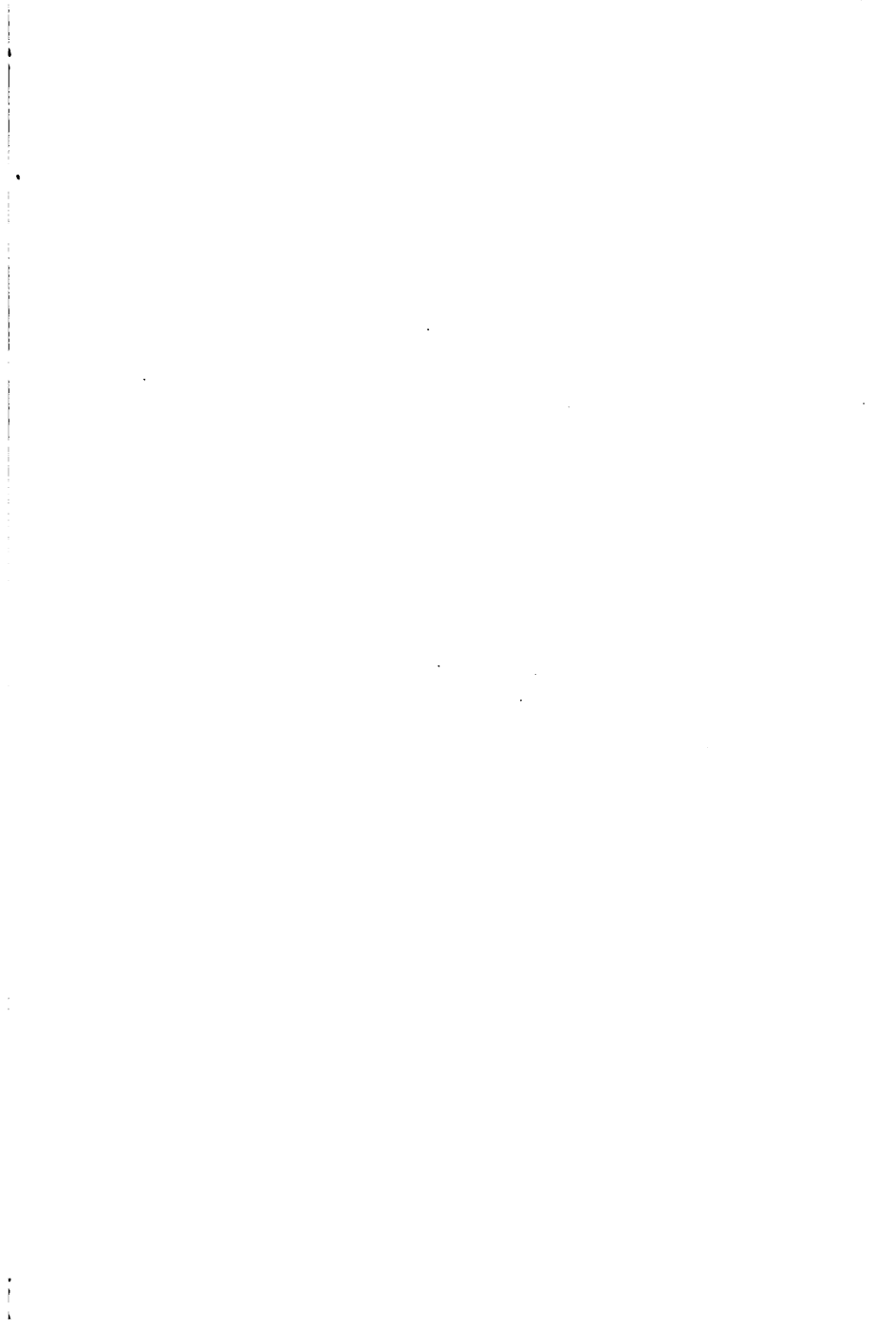
"Of course, you simple thing. Don't you see——"

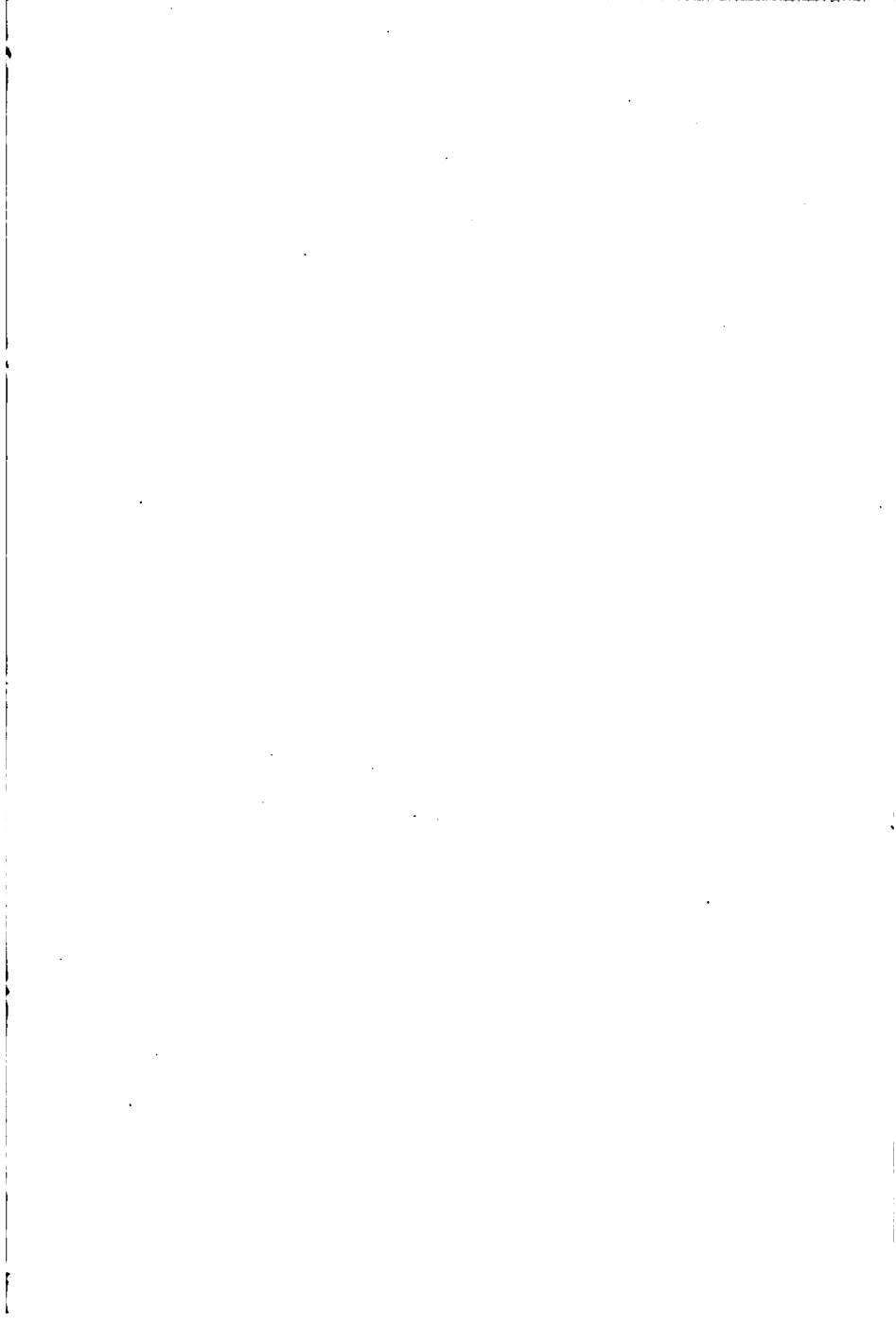
"Never mind," he interrupted hastily. "It don't signify now, does it?"

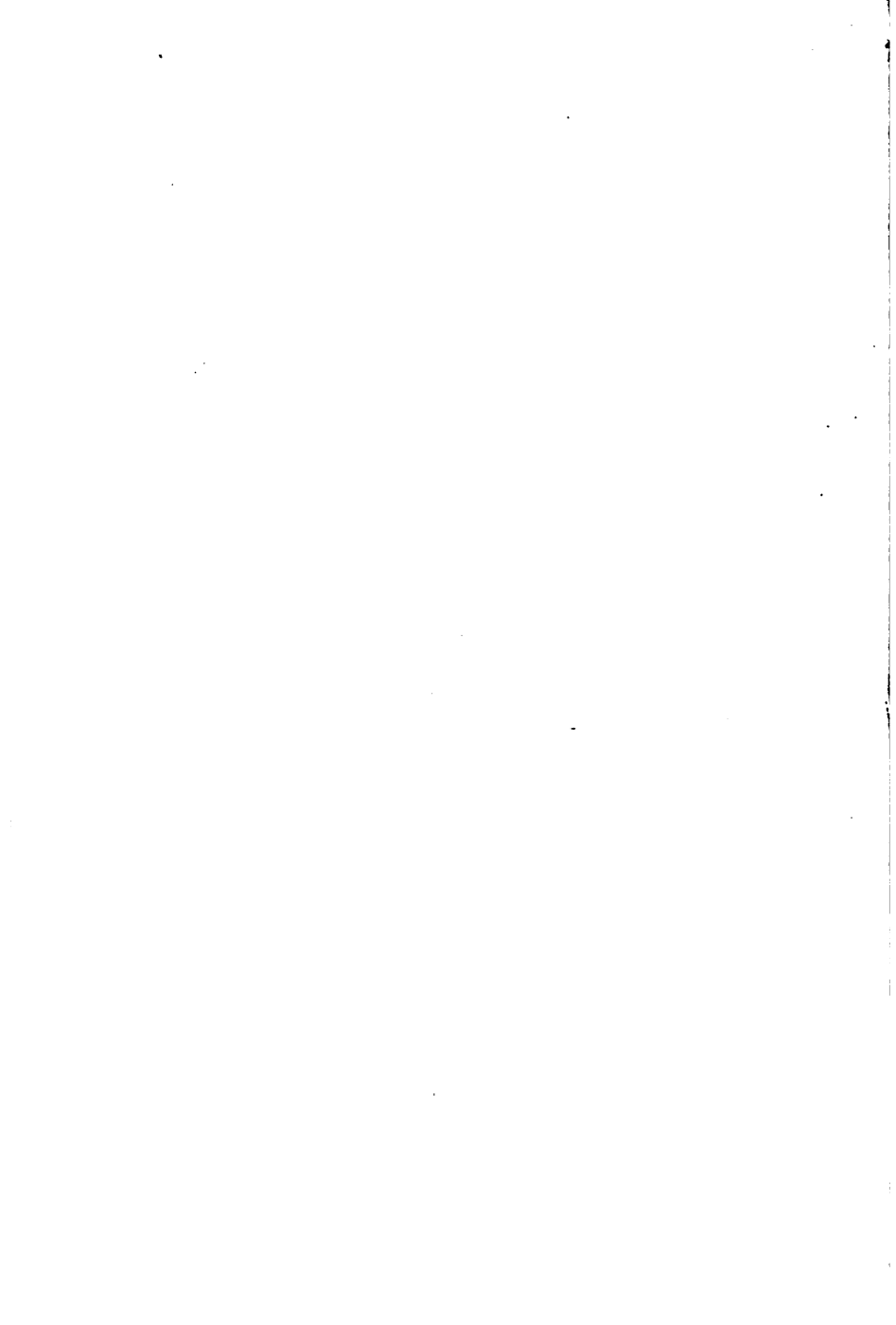
"No," said Miss Burr comfortably, "of course not."

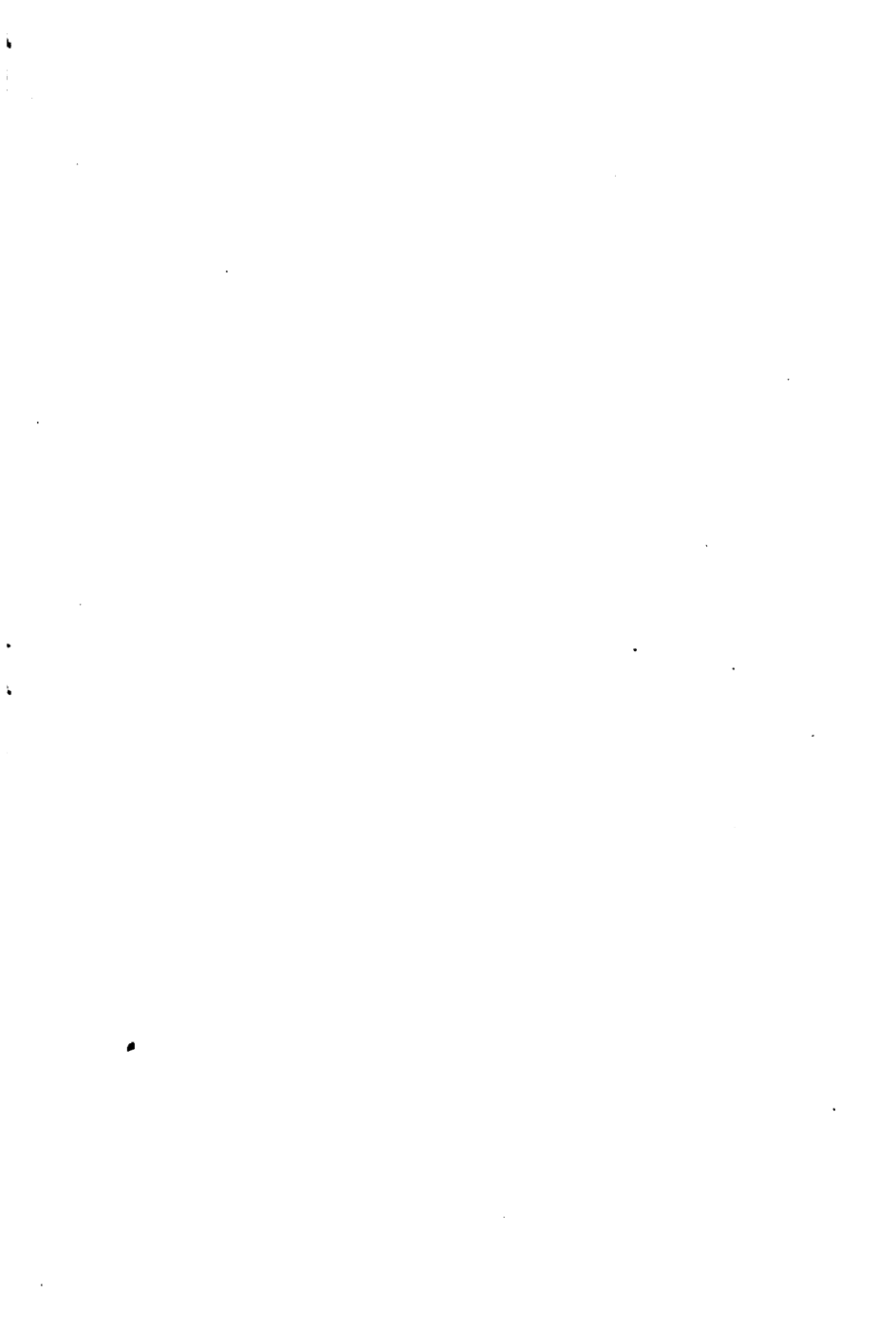


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